

## **NATO Expansion and Russian Access to the Baltic Sea**

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<sup>1</sup> *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 recent NATO accession of Finland, and future accession of Sweden, complicates Russia's access to and use of the Baltic Sea. Finland's membership in NATO also further constrains Russian access to the Kaliningrad Oblast.

The immediate impact of Finland's membership in the NATO alliance is to double the Russian border territory that is adjacent to NATO territory with the addition of the 1,340km border of Finland.<sup>2</sup> The addition also complicates the sea lane approaches to the Baltic fleet ports in both Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg. With St. Petersburg in particular, the addition of Finland to NATO makes the geographically narrow Gulf of Finland which measures 120km at its widest and only 52km at the from Porkkala, Finland to Rohuneeme on the Estonian side.<sup>3</sup> Sweden's Gotland Island, in the Baltic roughly halfway between Sweden and Latvia, provides a strategic position for situational awareness of both sea and air activities in the Baltic. The political shifts of NATO membership make these geographic features even more prominent for the regional security situation.

Sweden and Finland previously occupied a declared unaligned status within Europe. Helsinki, Finland hosted the 1975 signing of the Helsinki Final Act, which was the culmination of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe negotiations that took place in both Finland and Switzerland.<sup>4</sup> The discussions were an important dialogue between the countries of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, and the forum would eventually evolve into the current-day

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<sup>2</sup> "Ukraine invasion: EU shuts airspace to Russian planes", BBC News, February 27, 2022.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60539303>

<sup>3</sup> "Gulf of Finland", European Straits Initiative, retrieved April 11, 2023.  
<https://www.europeanstraits.eu/Partners/Gulf-of-Finland#:~:text=The%20Gulf%20of%20Finland%20is%20a%20very%20shallow%20bay%20of,80%2D100m%20at%20its%20mouth.>

<sup>4</sup> "Helsinki Final Act, 1975" U.S. State Department, retrieved April 11, 2023.  
<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki>

Organization for Security Cooperation in Europe, headquartered in Vienna.<sup>5</sup> Helsinki also hosted the high-profile meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in July 2018. Despite this unaligned status, both Finland and Sweden cooperated closely with NATO. They both were known as “Enhanced Opportunity Partners” and often participated in NATO exercises such as *TRIDENT JUNCTURE* 2018.<sup>6</sup> While close partners, Sweden and Finland deliberately hewed to their unaligned status, and Russia could count on this ambiguity in the Baltic region. Finland’s NATO membership eliminates this ambiguity. Finland’s government aggressively denounced Russia’s February 2022 military escalation in Ukraine. Finland’s former prime minister, Sanna Marin, in October 2022 responded to a reporter’s question about providing Russia with an “off-ramp” from the war in Ukraine by saying “The way out of the conflict is for Russia to leave Ukraine,” among the most direct rebukes of the Russian invasion.<sup>7</sup> On March 23, 2023 the U.S. Air Force flew a RC-135 “Rivet Joint” intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) aircraft in Finnish air space. While flights of U.S. ISR aircraft in European airspace are common, the U.S. European Command press release noted that this had been the first instance of such ISR aircraft operated over Finland.<sup>8</sup>

The addition of Finland and eventually Sweden to NATO turns the existing geography of the Baltic Sea into NATO choke points for Russia. On March 16, 2023 at Ramstein Air Base the

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<sup>5</sup> “History”, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, retrieved April 11, 2023.

<https://www.osce.org/history>

<sup>6</sup> James Hackett, “Finland, Sweden and NATO: The Capability Dimension”, International Institute for Security Studies, May 20, 2022. <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis//military-balance/2022/05/finland-sweden-and-nato-the-capability-dimension>

<sup>7</sup> “Finland’s PM rejects idea Putin needs an ‘off-ramp’ and simply suggests Russia leaves Ukraine”, SkyNews, October 7, 2022. <https://news.sky.com/video/finlands-pm-rejects-idea-putin-needs-an-off-ramp-and-simply-suggests-russia-leaves-ukraine-12714857>

<sup>8</sup> U.S. European Command Public Affairs, “US Aircraft Makes Historic Flight over Finland” U.S. European Command, March 24, 2023. <https://www.eucom.mil/pressrelease/42317/us-aircraft-makes-historic-flight-over-finland#:~:text=For%20the%20first%20time%2C%20a,to%20improve%20interoperability%20with%20Finland.>

commands of the Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish Air Forces signed a “joint declaration of intent” to increase collaboration among their respective air forces including integrated planning and execution of operations with the potential of a joint Nordic air operations center.<sup>9</sup> This enhanced cooperation could allow those nations to better coordinate the activities of their air forces to provide a more complicated problem set for Russia to plan to defend against. Even prior to the events of 2022, in 2018 Sweden reactivated military units on Gotland Island, which has a strategic location for any NATO reinforcement of the Baltic States.<sup>10</sup> Estonia announced in October 2021 that it would purchase the Blue Spear surface-to-surface coastal defense missile produced by a joint venture of Israel Aerospace Industries and ST Engineering Land Systems of Singapore.<sup>11</sup> The weapon’s range of up to 290 kilometers significant reach into the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic Sea.<sup>12</sup> Potential Estonian cooperation with its cross-strait ally Finland could increase the value of these missiles to deny Russia the use of the Gulf of Finland.

The Kaliningrad Oblast deserves special attention, as the isolated Russian territory becomes potentially more isolated as Finland joins the NATO alliance. Kaliningrad often plays the geopolitical role of the menacing base of Russian air and sea assets. It is also very vulnerable, with its land connections to Russia running through NATO member Lithuania and Russian ally

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<sup>9</sup> Gerard O’Dwyer, “Nordic Nations Move to Link Air Forces into 250-strong Aircraft Fleet”, Defense News, March 24, 2023. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2023/03/24/nordic-countries-move-toward-linking-their-air-forces-250>

planes/#:~:text=Nordic%20nations%20move%20to%20link%20air%20forces%20into%20250%2Dstrong%20aircraft%20fleet,-

By%20Gerard%20O&text=HELSINKI%20%E2%80%94%20Several%20Nordic%20countries%20have,to%20bolster%20the%20region's%20defenses.

<sup>10</sup> Felix Chang, “Crowded Pond: NATO and Russian Maritime Power in the Baltic Sea”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 14, 2021. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/12/crowded-pond-nato-and-russian-maritime-power-in-the-baltic-sea/>

<sup>11</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, “Estonia buys Blue Spear missiles for coastal defense”, Defense News, October 8, 2021. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2021/10/08/estonia-buys-blue-spear-missiles-for-coastal-defense/>

<sup>12</sup> Seth J. Frantzman, “Estonia buys Blue Spear missiles for coastal defense”, Defense News, October 8, 2021. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2021/10/08/estonia-buys-blue-spear-missiles-for-coastal-defense/>

Belarus. As a result of post-February 2022 restrictions on overflight of European Union territory by Russian airlines, flights between mainland Russia and Kaliningrad now must fly over the Gulf of Finland and the Baltic to avoid EU territory.<sup>13</sup> NATO maintains two Baltic Air Policing bases, located in Lithuania and Estonia, to monitor and intercept Russian military aircraft transiting between mainland Russian and Kaliningrad.

The accession of Finland, and eventually Sweden, to NATO greatly complicates Russian military operations in the Baltic Sea. While Russia can still play the role of “spoiler” by continuing to use its Kaliningrad territory in an anti-access/area denial role, the cost of doing so greatly increases, especially as Russia’s military is under strain due to on-going operations in Ukraine. If Russia chooses to use Kaliningrad in this “spoiler” role, it risks the complete isolation of the territory from mainland Russia since the land/sea/air links are so limited and vulnerable to disruption by other nations. St. Petersburg, historically Russia’s opening toward the west, sits at the eastern end of the narrow Gulf of Finland, with NATO members now guarding the opening of the strait. Kaliningrad, now Russia’s most western territory, has its already tenuous links to mainland Russia now able to be held at risk by NATO.

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<sup>13</sup> “Ukraine invasion: EU shuts airspace to Russian planes”, BBC News, February 27, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60539303>