

Russia and its Neighbours Dangerous Chess Strategies

“Russia has only two allies: its army and its navy.” It is assumed that these words belong to the Russian Emperor Alexander III. Regardless of whom this statement belongs to, the events in the 21st century show that the number of Russia’s “enemies” is increasing day by day, as if confirming this statement. However, the main reason for this situation is Russia's own hostile policy towards its surroundings. In other words, its policy of ignoring its nearest neighbours. Consequently, even Sweden and Finland, which have maintained their neutrality for many years, have now abandoned their neutrality policy and applied for NATO membership.

Although Stockholm and Helsinki’s decision is not an event that will fundamentally affect the European security architecture, it has provoked the following discussion: “How can the security of a state be ensured?” Does membership in a military alliance or a policy of neutrality ensure the security of the state? The main purpose of these two opposite strategies is to protect the state from external threats. So, they are two different paths leading to the same goal.

In this context, it should be noted that the policy of neutrality is not a security guarantee on its own. For example, Belgium, which remained neutral in both world wars, was attacked by Germany, in both world wars. Today, Russia's aggressive policy towards its neighbours has caused the two Northern European countries namely Sweden and Finland, to abandon their long-standing neutrality policy and choose to become less friendly with Russia.

Considering that each state has its own identity, we can say that one of the most important parts of Sweden and Finland's identities is neutrality. In the case of Sweden, this has meant that for nearly two centuries the country has gone through a transformation from an ambitious and great military power to a state that prioritizes the welfare of the people, the “people's house”. Sweden, which officially announced in 1814 that it would not join any military alliance, has not been involved in any wars, including the two world wars. So it can be said that this policy, which has continued until today, is the most important factor that ensures the welfare and security of the Swedish people.

The Finnish example is quite different. The young state, which gained its independence in 1917, sought a balance between its powerful neighbours, especially Russia (then USSR), and ultimately achieved this balance with the special relationship it established with the USSR after the Second World War. According to the treaty signed in 1948, the USSR agreed to give sovereignty to Finland (not to force it into the Eastern Bloc), while Finland agreed not to join any Western organization. In other words, Finland gained “limited sovereignty”. This process is known as “Finlandization” in world history. Although this concept is used in a somewhat negative sense, it should be noted that in the middle of the 20th century there was no other option for Finland, and the only alternative to this situation was to enter the orbit of the USSR. However, in this process, Finland has always remained as part of the West, even though it complied with its obligation not to formally join any Western institutions.

However, the post-Cold War accession of Sweden and Finland to the European Union (EU) also formalized their membership in the Western world, which sought to expand through both NATO and the EU. This situation did not cause any major crisis between the two states and Russia until mid-2000s. But since then, Russia started to follow an aggressive policy towards its close neighbours - using the expansion of NATO as an excuse - and this policy reached its peak with the attack on Ukraine in 2022, causing Stockholm and Helsinki to abandon their neutrality policies. At this point, it should be noted that this is more than just an administrative decision of the two states; a great change in public opinion among the Swedish and Finnish people is also taking place about the matter. So much so that before the war in Ukraine broke out, in January 2022, only 30% of the Finnish society supported NATO membership, while this figure increased to 68% in April. Meanwhile in Sweden, 57% of respondents supported joining NATO, and only 21% opposed it. What has happened since February 24, when the war in Ukraine began, has radically changed the perception of these countries about the goals of Russian foreign policy and the means that Moscow can use to achieve them.

On the other hand, the inclusion of Sweden and Finland in NATO is not a development that will fundamentally affect the balance of power in the region. However, the negative consequences for Russian security in this situation should not be ignored. If these two countries join the alliance, the Baltic Sea will

turn into a "NATO lake", and there will be no non-NATO countries on the Baltic coast except for Russia. In this regard, it will be easier for NATO to monitor the movements of military equipment and personnel in Western Russia. This means that Russia will have to increase its presence at sea and retaliatory measures such as strengthening its air defence systems.

Sweden has Gotland Island, the largest in the Baltic Sea. The island's location in the middle of the Baltic provides a significant military advantage to Sweden - and to NATO if it joins the alliance - as it allows control both in the airspace and over the passage of ships in the Baltic Sea. As a matter of fact, in the beginning of 2022, with the increasing tension in the European continent, Sweden strengthened its defence by sending additional military personnel and equipment to Gotland.

Moreover, both countries have well-trained and equipped armies. Finland, which has compulsory military service, has the capacity to mobilize 280,000 soldiers in case of any conflict. The number of reserve armed forces is 870,000. The country also announced in December 2021 that it would buy 64 F-35s to replace their old F-18s, a move that would make its air force the most powerful in Europe. Sweden, on the other hand, has recently reduced the number of its armed forces, like some other European states. Today, the number of soldiers in the country is around 23,000. However, with the war in Ukraine, both Stockholm and Helsinki announced that they would increase their military expenditures.

If Finland joins the alliance, the length of Russia's border line with NATO will double. This will force Russia to increase its military infrastructure on its Northwest borders.

Another important issue is that if Sweden and Finland join NATO, the balances in the Arctic will change to the detriment of Russia because all members of the Arctic Council, except for Russia, will become NATO member states. In fact, in the beginning of March, member states of the Council, referring to the war in Ukraine, announced that they would not attend Russia-organized meetings.

It should be highlighted that Moscow's silence on Stockholm and Helsinki's NATO membership application is a situation that will damage Moscow's image, because the main reason Russia wages war against Ukraine is to prevent it from joining the Alliance. Therefore, if Moscow does not retaliate against Sweden and Finland, the war it is waging in Ukraine will be further questioned.

Sweden and Finland's NATO membership will not dramatically change regional balance of power, and it does not mean that Russia would not be able to establish relations with them. The best example in this matter is Russia-Türkiye relations. Although Türkiye is a NATO member, close relations are established between Moscow and Ankara. Thus, Moscow's relations with Stockholm and Helsinki depend on the type of relationship they will establish with NATO. Because, as stated by Aleksandr Kortunov, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, at least two different "NATO membership models" have developed among Northern European countries today. The first is the "Baltic model" developed between countries such as Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. As these countries constantly feel threatened by Russia, they are ready to strengthen NATO's Eastern flank and become the Alliance's outpost. The second is the "Scandinavian model" followed by countries such as Norway and Iceland. These countries, on the one hand, carry out active bilateral cooperation with Russia; on the other hand, display a measured attitude towards NATO's activities on their own soil.

As a result, it seems that the tension in the region depends on what membership model Sweden and Finland would choose. The main factor that will determine their option is Russia's policy towards its neighbours. If Russia continues its aggressive policy, as it has done so far, the risk of conflict in the region will increase; if the country opts to change its attitude and begins to develop friendly relations with its neighbours, these states will no longer perceive Moscow as an enemy. To achieve this, Russia must first of all stop the war in Ukraine. However, at this stage, it would be wise for us not to expect such outcome.