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The War in Ukraine: Conflict Roots and Baltic States' Interests

by *Angelos Latses, Christos Bekkas-Morraris and Niki-Despoina Karousi*

Within a very short time, Russia's invasion in Ukraine has provoked a humanitarian crisis unprecedented to 21st-century Europe. Not only have the various cities in Ukraine counted hundreds of deaths, but also immense damage in their infrastructure which will require a multifaceted bottom-up rebuild. Thus far, experts have suggested that this is expected to have dire effects on local public health and businesses, among many other areas of Ukrainian public life. The crisis has also prompted an unprecedented economic shock to the global economy, with inexplicable rising rates of inflation with concern to a plethora of supply-chain products. Moreover, with more than 2 million Ukrainians having fled Ukraine, additional migration waves are expected.

Considering these widespread implications this course of events has drawn the attention of governments, organizations and other stakeholders across the globe. First, world leaders have decried President Putin of Russia over his decision to carry out a "special military operation" in Ukraine, as announced in his speech to declare the start of the war¹. Leaders in the G7, the European Union and NATO have already approved massive packages of sanctions on Russia, which vary in kind. For example, the European Commission opted for Russia to exit the SWIFT financial system, while both New Zealand and the United States, among other countries have openly terminated the export of military equipment and other goods to Russia. By therefore declaring war and deterring other countries from interfering, Putin called into question his trustworthiness as a political actor and, by extension, a moral figure of influence. Second, these actors have also responded to a great extent to the overall crisis by offering humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. These efforts are carried out mainly through the provision of funds to nonprofit organizations and by the promotion of messages for their counterparts to follow suit².

As the Russian-Ukraine conflict reaches its 90th day, this article will demonstrate the main developments, specifically considering the realist approach of Russia's invasion – its causes in the first part, and the implication of NATO domination of the Russian border in regard to the interests pursued by the Baltic states in the second part.

PART I

The current crisis in Ukraine has destabilized all aspects of the international system. Undeniably, Western policy makers have treated Russian aggression with

1 Robert Hunter, "The Ukraine Crisis: Why and What Now?", *Survival*, 2022.

2. European Commission, "Ukraine: EU agrees to exclude Russia banks from SWIFT", 2022.

lenience in the past as seen with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, causing President Putin to believe that Russia's actions would be without many consequences.

Today's international relations scholars recognize correctly that Ukraine is at the center of Moscow's revisionist foreign policy. The Ukrainian war has prompted a lot of academic discourse. Some go as far as to argue that the West has been involved in these developments with its miscalculation considering Putin's geostrategic insecurities and frustration over NATO's expansion. Moreover, the western consensus views the attack on Ukraine as unjustifiable and illegitimate. Other than predicting the future of the crisis, one of the most discussed aspects of the war is how the current situation emerged and is thereupon discussed in the next part of this article.

1) United States' Shift in the Global Arena

To begin with, one of the fundamental causes of this war is the shift in US's foreign policy over the last decade, as set by the Obama Administration and carried out by both Trump and Biden. In regards to its core geostrategic interests the United States has focused onto three particular areas: Europe, Northern Asia and the Persian Gulf. However, due to its trade war with China and its oil-interests in the Persian Gulf, European security concerns and Russian aggression has been pushed down on its agenda. Inevitably, this change created a security vacuum that Russia took advantage of.

2) Ukraine: A Divided Nation

Russia's actions in the Ukraine have both current relevance and a historical precedent. Ukraine's ethnic breakdown is at the forefront of the problem. Unquestionably, Russia and Ukraine are profoundly linked in terms of ethnicity, language and culture, which is seen by the Russian President as pretext to unite the two countries.

In a speech prior to the invasion, Putin stated that "Soviet Ukraine is the result of the Bolsheviks' policy and can be rightfully called 'Vladimir Lenin's Ukraine', both before and after the Great Patriotic War". According to him, "Stalin incorporated in the USSR and transferred to Ukraine some lands that previously belonged to Poland, Romania, and Hungary. In the process, he gave Poland part of what was traditionally German land as compensation, and in 1954, Khrushchev took Crimea away from Russia for some reason and also gave it to Ukraine. In effect, this is how the territory of modern Ukraine was formed." Further, the Putin administration used the narrative that the Russians in Eastern Ukraine face existential threats by the "Ukrainian Nazis" to justify its invasion in Donbas and violate the Minsk Agreement.

The polarizing voting pattern from the elections of 2010 that got Victor Yanukovich elected is a good indicator of how extremely divided the country is, with the majority of the Ukrainian speakers in West and the Russian speakers in the East. An important aspect of this East-West divide is the extreme differences in opinion between the citizens of

Ukraine regarding the orientation of their country towards Europe or Russia. Equally obvious is the fact that, the conflict between the West and Russia over Ukraine has been affected by the impeachment of Victor Yanukovych, a politician that Vladimir Putin reportedly wanted to remain in power and the election of pro-Western Zelenskyy.

Overall, the lack of cohesion within the Ukrainian society and the destabilization of its political scene, with the impeachment of Yanukovych and his replacement with a pro-European politician, made Putin feel that he would lose Ukraine to the West vis-à-vis NATO nuclear missiles coming at his doorstep.

3) NATO's Expansion

The heavy imbalance of power between NATO and Russia in Europe has been physically manifesting in Ukraine since 2014. George F. Kennan, the architect of America's post-World War II strategy of containment of the Soviet Union had called the expansion of NATO into Central Europe "the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era." According to him and most other Russia experts in the United States, expanding NATO would damage US's efforts to transform Russia from enemy to partner beyond repair.

In detail, NATO expansion took place in two stages. The first one was in 1999 with the incorporation of the Czech Republic and Hungary into the alliance. The second big tranche was in 2004 with the joining of the Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as, Romania and Bulgaria. It is important to note, the Russians vehement opposition since the mid-1990s against NATO's eastward expansion. However, due to a number of reasons they could do little to act on their security concerns and prevent it. Specifically, at the time they were economically too weak to react while simultaneously being preoccupied with the salvation of the remaining pieces of the Soviet Union. Despite its common borders with the Baltics, the circumstances were such that they were deemed unimportant enough to let go.

An event which foreshadowed the current conflict was NATO's Bucharest Summit during April 2008. After the end of the Summit the official declaration that was issued declared that "NATO Allies welcomed Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership and agreed that these countries will become members of NATO. The Membership Action Plan (MAP) is the next step for the two countries on their direct way to membership." Russia's response to this was immediate, and it came directly from its top-ranking governmental officials. Firstly, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Alexeyevich Ryabkov warned that, "Georgia's and Ukraine's membership in the alliance is a huge strategic mistake which will have most serious consequences for pan-European security". Conjointly, President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed his commitment to not allow NATO to expand any further by maintaining that, Georgia and Ukraine becoming part of NATO is a "direct threat" to Russia.

That same year, in August, a war between Russia and Georgia took place as an indirect consequence of this. The Georgians falsely thought the West with its invitation to NATO was sending them a signal of support. Instead, that support was nowhere to be found and the uprisings were swiftly contained by the Russians. In similar vein, the 2014 coup d'état against President Yanukovich in the Ukraine led to Russia's immediate response with the annexation of Crimea. Despite this series of events, with the West provoking and Russia responding violently, Western leaders did not manage to predict the scale of today's war in the Ukraine.

4) Vladimir Putin's Realpolitik

The countries of the Post-Soviet Russian sphere of influence are of great geostrategic and security importance for Russia. President Putin's aggressive responses to any outside interference showcase his unwillingness to let these countries go. After more than two decades of military build-ups, Russia is now in the position to follow up its previous threats and pursue its security goals.

The election of Volodymyr Zelenskyy in 2019, heightened Russia's fears of losing Ukraine to the West and was one of the reasons behind its invasion of the country earlier this year. The Russian terms to the West in exchange for its halting of its violent activities can be summed up in two choices. According to the first one, both sides should go back to the status quo that existed prior to February 22 of 2014 where Ukraine existed as a buffer state between them. The second one, indicates that any further action towards the Westernization of the Ukraine will lead to a further escalation. In light of the lack of any compromise between the two parties the latter one is taking place and subsequently wreaking havoc to an already battered by a pandemic global economy. Moreover, the oil crisis in Europe due to its energy dependence on Russia and the potential food supply crisis looming on the horizon due to the two of the largest wheat suppliers being at war with each other, put pressure on the West to reach some kind of concession with Russia.

However, despite Russia's belief that the west will back down first considering the mentioned circumstances, its own current situation is not much better. It is currently isolated, its actions rebuked by the international audience and its economy is suffering greatly as well. In conclusion, it is optimal for compromise to be reached between all parties involved before the toll on human lives and the global economy worsens any further. ³

3. Mearsheimer, John J. "The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities." New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

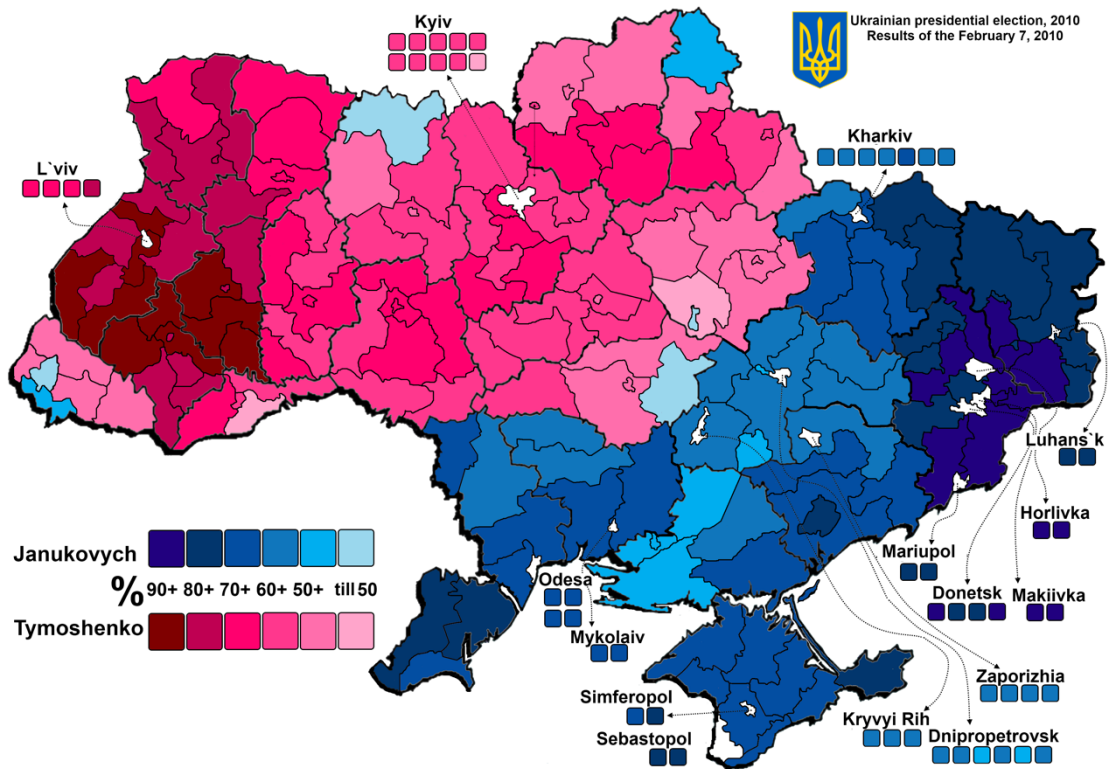


Figure 1: Ukraine's ethno-linguistic political split is similar to the United States' "red America" and "blue America", but deeper — imagine if red and blue America really spoke different languages. The current political battle, which boils down to whether the country will tilt toward Europe or Russia, is the Ukrainian version of gun-control, abortion, and same-sex marriage all wrapped into one.

PART II

It is in the best interest of the Baltic States (Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia) to secure their borders against a possible Russian or Belarusian invasion in an era when revisionist powers are opting for offensive realism. Russia has labeled the Baltic States a threat to its security and sovereignty since the latter's accession to NATO (and the European Union) in 2004. Russia was bitter about the motion even almost a decade before the fact, while it was still in draft for; specifically, Russia had stationed troops within them as late as 1995, four years after the fall of the Soviet Union.⁴ The bitterness about NATO's expansion in the Baltics has been ongoing ever since and is based largely on a sentiment of betrayal within Moscow, founded on the premise that the West promised not to expand NATO. The Baltics can consider this a myth due to two major arguments, one historical and one rational. Firstly, the think tank Chatham House states:

4. Andris Banka, «War on the Rocks», *The Breakaways: A Retrospective On The Baltic Road To Nato*, 2019.

“The U.S. secretary of state at the time, James Baker, had previously told Gorbachev that NATO’s jurisdiction would not move beyond the inner German border, but Washington retreated from this position after examining the practicalities of part of Germany being outside the Alliance. As part of the deal reached by Gorbachev and the West German chancellor, Helmut Kohl, no forces of other NATO countries could be deployed on former German Democratic Republic (GDR) territory until after Soviet forces had left, and then only temporarily. [...] However, Gorbachev neither asked for nor was given any formal guarantees that there would be no further expansion of NATO beyond the territory of a united Germany. The issue was not even under discussion at NATO at the time, since the Warsaw Pact and the USSR were both still in existence” [...].⁵

Evidently, the Gorbachev negotiations with the U.S. were tools of a larger process – the one that led modern Russia to be connected with the West. It appears, however, that Russia’s diplomatic actions, already on thin ice, took a massive blow after NATO’s 1999 Kosovo Campaign. Chatham House continues:

“From the end of 1993, Russian diplomacy voiced increasing opposition to NATO’s further enlargement, but accepted that it could not stop the process. Its chief lament was that several leaders of NATO countries in early 1990 had ruled out the possibility of NATO enlargement, and that the West had misled Russia. [...] Russian leaders at the time did not want the West to regard the new Russia as a truncated form of the USSR, but rather as a country that had regained its sovereignty and was returning to its European roots after the tragedy of Bolshevism. [...] The NATO–Russia Founding Act, signed in 1997, similarly pledged respect for the ‘inherent right’ of all states ‘to choose the means to ensure their own security’. [...] Moreover, NATO’s Kosovo campaign in 1999 did far more to shape anti-Western attitudes in Russia than NATO enlargement did. [...] Russia’s leaders chose to use the episode as evidence of a revived threat to Russia from the West – but were careful to distinguish NATO from the EU.”⁶

Therefore, Russian anti-NATO sentiment already had firm foundations, since Russia was already reluctant to withdraw its troops from the Baltic states and finally found its enabler in the Kosovo campaign. However, anti-NATO sentiment does not necessarily imply a counter-offensive like the one in Ukraine’s Crimea in 2014 or the generalized one happening in Ukraine as of the time of this piece’s writing.

Rationally speaking, Russia’s wish to occupy Ukraine – either through the Crimean invasion or the current one – moves the country’s borders closer to NATO instead of securing them, and as a result, the Baltic States are opting for containing an even stronger NATO presence. NATO’s military power is not diminished in any way because of Russia’s war; quite the contrary, Russia appears to be severely depleting its resources. Realistically, an offensive against Ukraine damages Russian-EU relations that Moscow initially opted to protect in their diplomacy – perhaps due to the mutual benefits in energy

5. Duncan Allan, et.al. *“Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia,”* 2021.

6. Duncan Allan et.al., *“Myths and misconceptions in the debate on Russia,”* 2021.

deals. Russia could have simply bolstered its defenses, reiterating public claims about having one of the strongest military forces on the globe, while doing business with a European Union that increasingly seeks to be economically and militarily independent from the U.S. Instead, Moscow aimed to risk Russia-EU relations by using their Nord Stream 2 supply as their free pass for waging war on Ukraine. Since 2014 the European Commission has aimed to solidify resource independence and diversification in their gas suppliers in a market which Russia had monopolized until then; Ukraine absorbed most of the EU's Third Energy Package, Poland completed a flagship liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal project and introduced reverse flows on its main transit pipelines, and a Baltic State, Lithuania, launched its LNG terminal and plans to build inter-connectors with Poland.⁷

7. Wojciech, Ostrowski. *«The Twenty Years' Crisis of European Energy Security: Central and Eastern Europe and the US»* Geopolitics, 2020.

Fearing an escalated, multi-fronted war, either due to energy issues or larger ideological aims of Moscow, the Baltic states are pushing for bolstered defenses ahead of June 29's 2022 NATO summit in Madrid. The request is for an increase in the battalion-sized multinational battlegroups, alongside adding a division-sized command headquarters to each of the three countries and the establishment of more permanent stationing plans.⁸ As such, the impact of Russia's actions on the Baltic states, due to Moscow's poor rationale and history with them, has been a perpetuation of fear and a desire to deepen their NATO roots rather than eradicate them into neutrality.

8. Robbie Gramer, «*Baltic States Are Pushing NATO for More Than Just a Tripwire Against Russia*», Foreign Policy, 2022.

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Prisoner Games: Iran's Detention of Westerners

by Alyssa-Elaine Braker

Iran is going through a politically delicate time. Apart from the negotiations on the revival of the 2015 nuclear program deal and the internal protests taking place over the prices of consumer goods, Iran has been facing severe allegations regarding the detention and sentencing of Ahmad-Reza Djalali, a Swedish-Iranian disaster medicine doctor. He was detained in 2016 and sentenced to death in 2017, based on accusations of espionage for Israel's Mossad that is allegedly responsible for the killings of two nuclear scientists in 2010.

There has been much debate with respect to Djalali and the announcement of his scheduled execution, with demonstrations taking place in Sweden. Meanwhile, Iran is accused of mistreating Djalali during his detention, prompting the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to issue a statement asking that his death sentence be overturned. Moreover, other UN experts claimed in March of 2022 that Djalali was subjected to "severe physical and psychological ill-treatment in prison that amounted to torture." Nonetheless, the Iranian foreign ministry declared that the sentence is final, yet they claimed that they would consider deferring it to a later date.⁹

The timing of the execution brings added concern among recent developments, particularly the arrest of Iranian alleged war criminal Hamid Noury in Sweden. He is accused of being responsible for the killing of political prisoners on government orders at Gohardasht in Karaj in 1988 and is standing trial in Sweden, set to be sentenced by July of this year.¹⁰ Iran has accused Sweden of overly politicizing the trial of Noury and has rejected talks of a prisoner swap in exchange for Djalali. Regardless, human rights groups across the world have claimed that the two cases are linked and that Djalali's upcoming execution is a direct reaction to Noury's arrest in Sweden in 2019 and his upcoming sentencing.¹¹

9. Miriam Berger, "Iran Says It's Reviewing Request to Delay Swedish Doctor's Execution.", Washington Post, 2022.

10. "Swedish-Iranian National Djalali to Be Executed by May 21 for Spying.", Middle East Monitor, May 2022.

11. Miriam Berger. "Iran Says It's Reviewing Request to Delay Swedish Doctor's Execution.", 2022.

During the debate surrounding these cases, two French citizens were also detained in May 2022. German and Swedish citizens are speculated to have been arrested as well. Families of the Western nationals being detained in Iran have claimed that they are being held as “pawns” in a “political game that they have no control over.” Activists in the West are also insisting that this policy of Iran is being used to gain concessions from the nations of the people being detained.¹² So far Iran’s intentions are unconfirmed. Its end goal will be revealed as further developments arise in Djalali’s case.

12. Stuart Williams, “*Swedish Citizen Risking Iran Execution Is ‘Hostage’: Amnesty*,” Al-Monitor, May 2022.

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India's Heat Wave & Wheat

by *Melina Giannakouli*

Environmental scientists have warned that we will experience the deterioration of the environment and as a consequence, the appearance of more extreme weather conditions in the near future. India experienced the hottest April in the last 122 years of heat waves.¹³ India's annual heat waves have doubled in length and arrive earlier than in previous years. While the country's average surface temperature ranges between 45 and 55°C, the north-western parts of India are experiencing temperatures above 60°C.¹⁴ Due to extreme weather conditions, hundreds of deaths have been reported across the country.¹⁵ These temperatures have caused wide-scale damage on plantations and have led to water and electricity shortages. The heatwaves have limited the supply of wheat in 2022.¹⁶

India is the second-largest wheat producer, and the heat wave it is currently experiencing is not permitting it to make up for the production deficit caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war. In view of the intensification of the conflict and the subsequent destabilization of global agricultural markets, consumers have started seeing India as an alternative provider for wheat supplies.¹⁷ Countries such as Egypt largely rely on India right now for wheat supply, as it is the largest importer of wheat, and it is trying to replace the lost shipments from the Black Sea.

The sanctions that were imposed on Russia further incentivized countries to find substitutes for energy and food. Both Ukraine and Russia supplied countries with various commodities, including wheat. However, the current war has caused the suspension of

13. Ellis-Petersen, Hannah, and Shah Meer Baloch, "We Are Living in Hell': Pakistan and India Suffer Extreme Spring Heatwaves." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, May 2, 2022.

14. Ellis-Petersen, Hannah, and Shah Meer Baloch, "We Are Living in Hell': Pakistan and India Suffer Extreme Spring Heatwaves." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, May 2, 2022.

15. Bill Spindle, "The World Has No Choice but to Care about India's Heat Wave." *The Atlantic*, May 8, 2022.

13. Arshad R. Zargar, "Wheat Prices Hit Record High as India's Heat Wave-Driven Export Ban Compounds Ukraine War Supply Woes." *CBS News*, May 17, 2022.

17 Deutsche Welle, "India Bans Wheat Exports amid Severe Heat Wave: DW: 14.05.2022." *DW*, 2022.

these activities.¹⁸ The UN reported that approximately 20 million tons of harvested wheat were seized in Ukraine.¹⁹ Moreover, the water scarcity that Brazil, the United States and Europe are facing further promoted the idea that India was the only major supplier left. However, India decided to ban wheat exports, which worsened the fears of a global food shortage and created a strong sense of a looming food security crisis.²⁰

Many countries have requested that India reconsider its decision to ban the export of wheat. This is largely due to their concerns that, along with rising energy prices, inflation will skyrocket and possibly lead countries to recession.²¹ Due to India's heat waves, wheat production and the export ban, global prices were pushed up to 6%.²² Along with the possibility of energy and food shortages, there is fear of a further increase in famine and the spread of social unrest across the globe.

Touching upon the climate change issue, India had committed to reduce emissions and invest in clean and renewable sources to reach net-zero. Amidst the energy and food crisis, it has decided to re-open coal mines and increase its coal exports.²³ One of the greatest challenges that the world is currently facing is climate change. Yet, recent events have put pressure on countries supporting the switch to green energy to return to using fossil fuels instead. Unfortunately, India is one of the countries whose climate goals have been affected negatively by the crisis in Ukraine.

18. Derek Saul, "Ukraine Says May Grain Exports down more than 60% compared to 2021 in Latest Alarming Sign of International Food Crisis." *Forbes*, May 19, 2022.

19. Derek Saul, "Ukraine Says May Grain Exports down more than 60% compared to 2021 in Latest Alarming Sign of International Food Crisis." *Forbes*, May 19, 2022.

20. Arshad R. Zargar, "Wheat Prices Hit Record High as India's Heat Wave-Driven Export Ban Compounds Ukraine War Supply Woes." *CBS News*, May 17, 2022.

21. Arshad R. Zargar, "Wheat Prices Hit Record High as India's Heat Wave-Driven Export Ban Compounds Ukraine War Supply Woes" *CBS News*, May 17, 2022.

22. Carrington, Damian, "Deadly Indian Heatwave Made 30 Times More Likely by Climate Crisis" *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, May 23, 2022.

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<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/india-heat-wave-wheat-prices-soar-climate-change-ukraine-war-supplies/>.

Finland & Sweden: The End of Military Non-Alignment

by Nefeli Syrmali

May 18, 2022, marked an important date for both Finland and Sweden, as it saw the end of their long-standing military non-alignment, with their simultaneously submitting their official letters of application to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The significance of such a security move on both countries' parts lies in their historic past of non-alignment. Sweden has a long history of neutrality and has maintained a neutral stance since King Gustav XIV's proclamation of such in 1834. Finnish neutrality is a more recent development, and it was majorly triggered by the Soviet Union's security concerns, with the 1948 *Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance* (FMCA) between it and Russia, highlighting its policy of Russian appeasement.²⁴

While their respective previous non-aligned status and their current decision to join NATO look similar on the surface, the motivations behind their actions differ greatly. The Finnish decision on neutrality was prompted by pragmatic geopolitical and security concerns regarding the shared 830-mile border with militarily powerful Russia. Swedish neutrality, however, has been long-lasting and constitutes an important aspect of its national identity and ideology.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, signified to the Nordic countries that their traditional neutral alignment might not shelter them from any future Russian aggression. They saw fit to reconsider their security interests and decided that accession would act as a better deterrent than non-alignment would, especially taking into account NATO's Article 5 provision of collective defense. While both countries have maintained close collaboration with NATO over the years, they have strategically avoided active membership.

Recent events, however, have caused public opinion to rapidly change.²⁵ The Finns, due to their geographic proximity and historic past with Russia, came to the realization that they might share Ukraine's fate. Thus, their policy shifted on account of pragmatic considerations. Finland's urgency is not shared by Sweden, as the latter does not share a

24. Herriksson et. al, "Finland", 2022.

25. Reuters Team, "Explainer: Finland, Sweden, on verge of applying to join NATO", 2022.

border with Russia. Finland's actions, however, rushed Sweden to join the fray with it, as Sweden would have been too exposed as the only Nordic country outside NATO (Henley, 2022). Despite some reluctance to discard such a major aspect of its national identity, the two close countries will join NATO hand in hand.

In spite of the significance of these countries' shift in policy, Russian military retaliation against their NATO applications is considered unlikely by most ²⁶. While the Kremlin has argued against any type of NATO Nordic expansion for years, it is currently preoccupied with Ukraine and its influence in the area has diminished since the two countries joined the European Union. Nonetheless, the Northern European additions will greatly enhance NATO's European influence. ²⁷

But there is currently an obstacle to their membership: Turkey. The country objects the Nordic expansion on the grounds of security concerns regarding Swedish and Finnish support of the Kurdistan's Workers' Party (PKK), which Ankara considers a terrorist group, as well as their imposing arms exports restrictions on Turkey. ²⁸ It is clear that the country is using its ability to veto prospective members and the Nordics' hope for a quick accession as leverage against the U.S. and Europe to accomplish its objectives. The current diplomatic talks between the countries will shape how the Nordic NATO expansion will pan out.

26. Jon Henley, "*A historic change': how Sweden and Finland trod separate paths to Nato*", 2022.

27. Jen Kirby, "*Finland and Sweden's historic NATO bids, explained*", 2022.

28. Emmott, Spicer and Humeysa, "*How Turkey spoiled NATO's historic moment with Finland, Sweden*", 2022.

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Biden's visit to Asia: New security implications and Indo-Pacific strategy

by Yasmine Neri

This May, President Biden's visit to South Korea and Japan has garnered a lot of attention in International Relations media, as it was his first trip to the region since his inauguration. It may seem overdue, considering that the Indo-Pacific has been designated as this administration's top foreign policy priority. However, this long-awaited visit has understandably faced delays, amid Covid-19 restrictions and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Kim and Sharma). Now, the administration is keen on demonstrating that they have not been distracted from their major objective of the 21st century, namely, competing with and counterbalancing China.

By selecting South Korea and Japan as the key stops of this 5-day tour, Biden aimed to strengthen partnership and cooperation at a moment of global instability, and ultimately send a message to China and North Korea of Washington's commitment to the region (Campbell). In fact, while in South Korea, the President visited Samsung Electronics' semiconductor plant, as one U.S. goal is to build supply chains with its allies and reduce their dependence on essential items from autocratic regimes. Biden met with the new President, Yoon Suk-Yeol, who made it clear that the main pillar of his foreign policy rests on strengthening the South Korea-U.S. alliance (Tiezzi). Along the same lines, Biden held bilateral discussions with the Japanese Prime Minister, Fumio Kishida, discussing their shared objective of strengthening the "free and open international order"²⁹ by focusing on the Indo-Pacific region. Finally, the two leaders, joined by the leaders of India and Australia, attended a Quad Summit and launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), which is widely seen as the countries' efforts to counter China's territorial claims and reach in the region (Ryall).

Although the framework is economic in nature, through the formation of alliances of regional partners that aim at strengthening supply chains, the improvement of infrastructure, greater sustainability and fair trade (Campbell), security issues still took

29. The White House: Japan-U.S. Joint Leaders' Statement.

prime attention (Rocchetti). In fact, the framework offers parallel efforts towards regional security alliances aimed at limiting China's expansion in the region (Ryall). Furthermore, during the bilateral discussions held with Prime Minister Kishida, Biden reiterated the United States' commitment to intervening in case of Chinese military aggression towards Taiwan, deviating from the ambiguous policy traditionally maintained by Washington by answering positively to the question "[is the U.S.] willing to get involved militarily to defend Taiwan?"³⁰

The new administration's Indo-Pacific strategy was announced in February 2022, and the President's visit reflects Washington's putting this policy into action. The country's commitment to this policy is rock-solid, reflecting the undeniable reality that the Indo-Pacific region is one of the most dynamic in the world, and anything that happens there can affect people and nations everywhere in the world.³¹

30. The White House: Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio of Japan in Joint Press Conference.

31. The White House: FACT SHEET: Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States.

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