**War in Ukraine and new NATO members**

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A few days ago, I had the opportunity to talk with two young men from Ukraine in Islamabad, one a doctor and the other still a student. They said that they wanted to return to Ukraine because the situation had improved in their hometown. Besides, the doctor’s wife wanted to go home soon, showing their one-month-old baby to their relatives. So, they hoped they could travel soon, not directly to Ukraine, but through a neighbouring country.
Our conversation turned to the terrible Russian War in Ukraine, and, as a pacifist, I suggested that maybe it would have been better if Ukraine had not fought back militarily when they were attacked by Russia, and now supplied by weapons from the West. That thought was not new to the doctor; he said that when Russia in 2014 had annexed Crimea, the direct conflict was over in four days; now, the war has lasted for three months and the devastation is unimaginable in the eastern parts of the country, in Mariupol, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and other cities and towns. Many civilians have died or been injured, physically or mentally; and thousands of soldiers, on both sides, have died, and many are victims every hour and every day; as many as 14 million out of the country’s total population of about 45 million have been displaced internally or have become refugees abroad.
Had Ukraine made it clear to Russia before the war started that they would not fight back militarily, but instead engaged in talks and negotiations, the war might not have begun. We should also be aware that there has been a war-like situation in the eastern parts of Ukraine for eight years, between the Russian speaking people, supported by Russia, and other groups. Most people, in the militarised mindset and world we live in, would disagree with me on not fighting back militarily when attacked. However, if we consider the terrible loss of life that has taken place, and still take place, a peaceful solution would have been better. Even if Ukraine would have had to give up land to Russia, the borders could possibly be renegotiated after the end of the current regime and presidency in Russia. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger suggested this yesterday to strong objection from Ukraine President Zelensky. It is likely that Russia will win the current war in the east and south of Ukraine, but lose sympathy worldwide. If Russia continues with the aim to ‘finish Ukraine as an independent country’, local and international resistance will be huge and it could lead to expansion and a new war with the West.
Furthermore, we must realise that the current war is not only a Russian War in Ukraine; it is a war between Russia and the West, notably USA and NATO countries in Europe. After the war, Ukraine’s facilities to make arms will be very limited for a long time as many of the country’s high tech industrial plants were in the east, now destroyed. The weapons export was big, and Ukraine has been listed as the eighth or tenth largest exporter in the world. Now that market is open for Russia, the US, and others under their wings. This gives a hint of the superpowers’ roles in all wars. My new friends from Ukraine said that the superpowers are behind all wars, and a country like Ukraine may be pushed to play a role in the interest of the West.
The other top theme in international politics that I would like to discuss today, related to the war in Ukraine, is the expansion of NATO as both Finland and Sweden have submitted their applications. The Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said he is against their membership, especially that of Sweden. He has claimed that Sweden and Scandinavian countries harbour terrorists from groups who operate against Turkey, including such affiliated to Kurdish Labour Party, PKK, and affiliated PYK, in Syria. It would be impossible for Sweden to expel Kurds or others who have been granted asylum, and as for being lenient on terrorists, it is a fact that Sweden and Turkey both have termed as terrorist some of the groups in question this time. Yet, Turkey may get other advantages, for example related to weapons trade with the US and more. In the end, it is likely that Turkey and the other 29 NATO members will approve the entry of the two new members, which must be made anonymously. We should also know that once a member is in NATO, the member cannot be expelled. All in all, I believe it is healthy to question any new NATO member, and Sweden and Finland shouldn’t take for granted, a priori, that they become members. Turkey does also have some real concerns, said the NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg on Tuesday this week in a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.
In Sweden, the current debate over its entry into NATO may have positive sides, too. True, it may delay the entry by some weeks, till the ‘horse trading’ is over, but since entering NATO is a major change in Sweden security and foreign policy, it is good if it is not rushed more than it already is. It is good that here will be some more time for the Swedish public to discuss the NATO membership issues. We know that Sweden has stayed outside direct military conflicts for some 200 years, and that during the Cold War, Sweden felt independent and free to criticise both the Soviet Union and USA, indeed the American War in Vietnam. Sweden’s highly respected PM Olof Palme (assassinated in 1985) feared none when speaking about foreign policy issues, indeed war, peace, development aid, and more. When Sweden now becomes a NATO member, part of an alliance which to a major extent builds its deterrence on nuclear weapons, Sweden must reconsider how it will work on many international issues, indeed issues related to reduction and abolition of nuclear weapons. Sweden’s voice on international issues will be less bold and less independent in the future.
People all over the world often become nostalgic when talking about Olof Palme, and indeed the eminent Swedish Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953-1961, Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961). The Nordic countries may together be able to fill some of the space that Sweden leaves empty. I hope the Nordic countries together manage to create a new, liberal block within NATO, probably in close contact with Germany and others, certainly with the US at an arm’s length distance.
This is indeed an important opportunity that I hope the Nordic countries manage to shoulder. The slightly slower entry of Finland and Sweden into NATO, caused by Turkey, may be very positive. There is a need for a deeper, broader and more democratic debate in Sweden, and probably also in Finland, before the NATO memberships are confirmed. It is also useful to listen to Turkey’s concerns, and maybe questions from other countries will also come. After all, expansion of NATO has only been on the concrete political agenda since the time of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The Nordic countries can play a progressive and peaceful role within NATO. In addition, the whole NATO alliance must focus on modernising and renewing its thinking to meet today’s and tomorrow’s challenges. NATO must contribute to a safer and more peaceful world, not a more insecure and militarised world; that also includes dialogue and cooperation with Russia, China, and other countries.