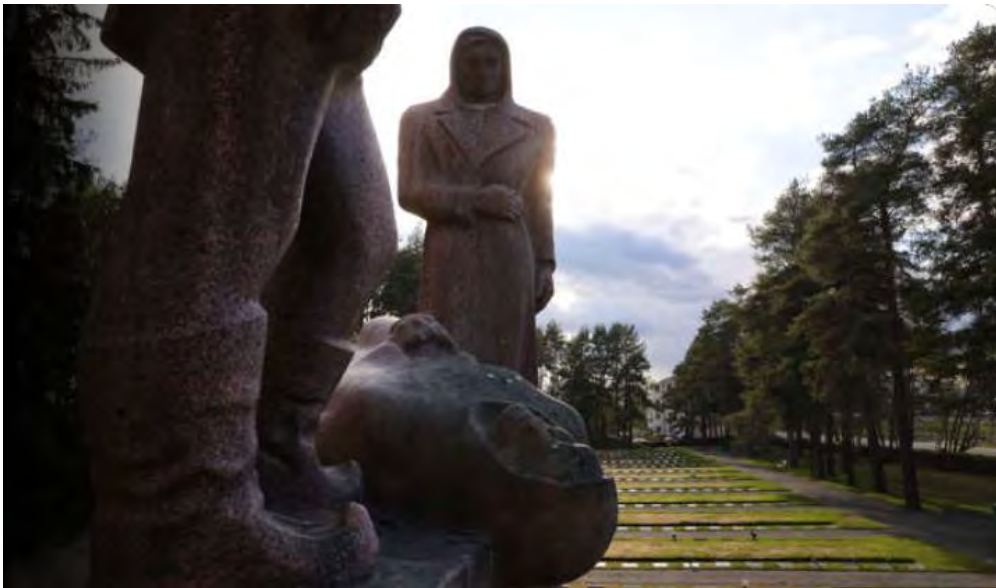


Bringing Finland into NATO is a big mistake
Stephen Kinzer (Opinion) - The Boston Globe



Sean Gallup

With war raging in Ukraine, long-neutral Finland is suddenly eager to join the American-led NATO military alliance. We shouldn't jump into this marriage. Finland has an 830-mile border with Russia. That's 830 miles of potential explosions where American and Russian troops could be face to face.

Admitting Finland into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would provoke Russia, endanger Finland, and possibly drag the United States into war against a nuclear-armed power.

The Russian army's pitiful performance in Ukraine makes clear that it poses little military threat to Finland. Besides, the Finns are no pushovers. They amazed the world by fighting off Stalin's invasion in the "Winter War" of 1939-40.

Today Finland can mobilize large numbers of reserve soldiers on short notice, has an elaborate system of underground bunkers, and even manufactures its own sleek version of the AK-47 combat rifle.

Since the days of the Winter War, Finland has struck an admirable strategic balance. It maintains friendly relations with the superpower next door but also builds its defenses to discourage any thoughts of aggression. With NATO membership, that balance will be gone. A country that has been a valuable bridge between East and West will surrender that role.

President Urho Kekkonen brilliantly managed Finland's delicate relations with the Soviet Union for much of the Cold War. This allowed him to preserve his country's democracy and independence while it rose from being Europe's poorest country in 1945 to one of its most prosperous.

“President Kekkonen told me that Finland must not only remain neutral, but she must be seen to remain neutral, and above all she must be able to convince Moscow of her desire as well as the ability to maintain this neutrality,” a foreign diplomat wrote after meeting him.

“He told me that he made it a point to spend part of his summer, as well as winter vacations, with the Soviet leaders in different resorts in their vast country, and it was obvious that the personal relations that he had developed with them were unique, and quite beyond anything by any other non-communist leader.”

Finland now wants to abandon the nonalignment that has served it so well for generations. Neighboring Sweden wants to do the same. Bringing either of those countries into NATO would impose new security burdens on the United States, but at least Sweden does not share a border with Russia. That border is what makes Finland’s application so dangerous.

Arguments against Finnish entry into NATO are straightforward. Finland faces no serious danger. If attacked, it can defend itself, with help from neighbors if necessary. The United States should not assume obligations to go to war for more countries whose fate does not decisively affect us.

Despite all this, the United States is rushing to pull both Finland and Sweden into NATO. We are working frantically to appease the interests of member countries that threaten to veto their accession, most notably Turkey. Why the fervor? There are two reasons. One is awful. The other has a terrifying strategic logic.

The main reason we are pushing so hard to bring Finland and Sweden into NATO is the same reason Congress so quickly approved a staggering \$40 billion in military aid to Ukraine: emotion.

According to our national narrative, the Ukraine war is a turning point in history, a conflict that will shape the future of the world. Caught up in our good-versus-evil paradigm, we’re determined to defend freedom and punish aggression. Emotion, however, is always the enemy of wise statecraft.

Making a huge decision like this — more than doubling NATO’s border with Russia at a single stroke — requires sober reflection. It should not be done while a nation or government is caught up in throes of outrage.

Beyond that terrible reason to admit Finland lies another, scarier one. American leaders have begun conceding what has seemed evident for weeks: that Washington views the Ukraine conflict as a proxy war between the United States and Russia.

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said America’s goal in Ukraine is “to see Russia weakened,” and the US ambassador to NATO, Julianne Smith, said it is “to see a strategic defeat of Russia.”

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the United States seeks to inflict “maximum negative impact on Russia.”

President Biden has decreed that President Vladimir Putin of Russia “cannot remain in power.”

Some in Washington apparently believe that war between the United States and Russia is possible, maybe inevitable, and perhaps even desirable. It’s a seductive logic. If you’re thirsting for war with Russia, bringing Finland into NATO is a great idea. Otherwise, not so much.

Finland will probably join NATO soon. Americans and Finns will cheer. In the long run, though, this radical step could pose strategic danger to the United States. It will turn neutral Finland into at least a potential enemy of its powerful neighbor, Russia, making it a possible battleground.

Finland is safer as it is.

With Russian troops charging across a country with a border just a few hundred miles from Helsinki, however, Finns are racing into America’s arms. It’s an embrace we should resist — and that they may later regret.