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## COMMENTARY

# Russia's Cold War With Scandinavia

The Kremlin prepares military maneuvers in the Baltic, as Sweden and Finland sweat.



Swedish tanks on the island of Gotland, Sweden, Sept. 14, 2016. PHOTO: SOREN ANDERSSON/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Azita Raji*

Aug. 28, 2017 6:57 p.m. ET

The current relationship between the U.S. and Russia is eerily evocative of the Cold War, complete with aggressive aircraft interceptions, harassment at sea, and diplomatic expulsions. But there are significant, consequential differences between America's relationship with the Soviet Union and with the Russian Federation.

Today's situation is more perilous, made so by Russian President Vladimir Putin's sense of grievance and revenge. Alliances have shifted too. The nations of the Warsaw Pact dissolved that treaty and most then joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. What remains of the nonaligned bloc is more nostalgic whimsy than an influential group of nations.

Consider Sweden and Finland. While they no longer assert their neutrality as they did during the Cold War, the Swedes and Finns are finding it hard politically at home to challenge the perceived benefits of nonalignment. They seem to be playing it safe, with one foot in the NATO camp and the other—even if lightly set down—outside it. But for all the talk of neutrality, Sweden and Finland are as militarily capable as some NATO allies and enjoy a privileged relationship with the alliance.

The peril in this is Russia's growing ire at the increasingly close relationships among the Swedes, the Finns and NATO. Russia has warned both nations of harsh consequences if they join the alliance. This ought not be dismissed as idle blather: Mr. Putin has sent aircraft close to the Swedish border to run practice strikes on Stockholm. Swedes and Finns suffer Russian cyberattacks, overflights and misinformation campaigns meant to destabilize their governments.

It's no wonder Sweden and Finland feel more vulnerable than they did during the Cold War. No longer effectively neutral nor members of a broad military alliance, they are subject to Russia's belief that they side with NATO. Swedes and Finns have responded robustly to Russian aggression. They have boosted military spending and signed a mutual-support agreement with each other.

These nations saw what happened when Russia invaded Ukraine, which also had a privileged partnership with NATO. Without membership, and the Article 5 protection it offers, the alliance didn't send troops to Ukraine's defense. For Sweden and Finland, the

difference between the Cold War and today is that they don't have the vague and unreliable "protection" of neutrality, nor do they have the formal and real protection of NATO. As tensions with Russia increase, Swedes and Finns are trapped in their historical identity of neutrality and their current position of military nonalignment.

The Russian military forces currently gathering for next month's Zapad military exercise across the Baltic Sea will be watched closely and with grave concern in Stockholm and Helsinki. But unlike during the Cold War, the Swedes and Finns will be able to rely on a strong defense relationship with the U.S., sealed with bilateral memorandums of understanding that allow for joint-military planning, exercises and intelligence exchanges. During my time as U.S. ambassador to Sweden, trilateral meetings among the U.S., Sweden and Finland were inaugurated and are further tightening military cooperation.

While this close relationship is no substitute for NATO membership, the Russians know the U.S. will not stand idly by should they attack Sweden or Finland. During my tenure, then-Vice President Joe Biden visited Sweden to affirm the American commitment to the region. Vice President Mike Pence has repeated that pledge.

Close diplomatic and military ties enhance regional stability. But without status and standing in an alliance, and given the chilling example of Ukraine, a feeling of vulnerability persists. It's a race against time: Will Sweden and Finland be able to join NATO, escaping this perilous limbo, before Russian aggression overwhelms them? Or will they continue to kick the can down the road, hoping that relations with Russia improve?

I'm reminded of a game I played in childhood, "Spot the Difference." It involved looking at two pictures that seemed to show the same thing, but were in some subtle ways different. It isn't hard for Sweden and Finland to spot the difference between the Cold War and today's pending conflicts. For one thing, ground zero for any potential conflict will be their own backyard.

Leaders in Stockholm and Helsinki are about to witness in Zapad a possible harbinger of the future. How this leads them to rethink their relationship with NATO will have a profound impact on the security of generations to come.

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*Appeared in the August 29, 2017, print edition.*

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