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Spring 4-11-2023

## **NATO - Sweden and the Frenemy Within**

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April 11, 2023



**The alliance has not properly considered the risks emanating from the half-hearted or hostile within the organization.**



During the Cold War, the insider threat to the transatlantic alliance was either infiltration by the Warsaw Pact or some form of theft. The central focus was on counterintelligence and the main enemy was Soviet espionage.

Today, in 2023, the insider threat is not only spies and sabotage; it is any misalignment with the mission, which undermines the mission and its ability to conclude the tasks successfully. Regretfully, that can mean elements of some member states — including governments — are an issue.

This is of course a problem of success. As the alliance grows — Finland's entry on April 4 making it member state number 31 — was a wonderful moment, reflecting the free choice of a representative democracy to seek the security offered by a military alliance with its fellows.

But not every alliance applicant is Finland, as the case of member state number 32 makes clear. Sweden too is a democracy that ranks at the top of just about every global ranking, from wealth to personal freedom and personal contentment. It is, as Shakespeare once said of England, the envy of less happy lands. Its entry is being blocked by two NATO members — Turkey and Hungary — run by illiberal rulers using their veto power to punish a likely future ally for past slights. Sweden is no more a paragon of virtue than any other country, and can no doubt be very irritating in some of its positions, but there seems more than a hint of malice in this process.

The issue of Swedish membership is a case study of the problems inherent in a military alliance relying on consensus. It is inevitable that in such a huge organization there will be enormous cultural width, differing perceptions, call it *weltanschauung* or political views, as well as old and new cleavages. Several NATO countries have relatively large far-left and far-right parties, demanding everything from the rejection of the market economy to an illusionary condition of ethnic homogeneity, free from any foreign influence or influx.

Both the far-left and the far-right oppose NATO in most cases. Even 30-plus years after communism's collapse, many citizens in formerly occupied states harbor a romantic view of what totalitarian socialism is and how it was to live under those conditions. They understand that such values, including an absolute hostility to liberal democracy, are among the defining features of the Russian Federation. And they admire that.

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These anti-NATO sentiments will migrate into the military establishments of those countries, even on a minor scale, since the armed forces reflect the populations they are drawn from. And of course these societal fissures present opportunities for adversarial states to undermine the most important pillar of NATO democracies – the population’s trust and confidence in their political leadership.

We know this because we can see it. Russian troll factories have in recent years actively supported far-right groups to catalyze splits in targeted societies, with material designed to stoke anti-immigration, anti-government, and anti-NATO sentiment. The Russians know they have sympathizers within the European Union and NATO countries. The Kremlin’s agents present themselves as an alternative to colonialism, capitalism, and American influence – a narrative that might seem laughably false, but is packaged as a plausible explanation for those already leaning in an authoritarian direction.

The difference between this anti-NATO undercurrent and official policy surfaced very clearly as the full-scale war in Ukraine got underway. Several countries have faced a discrepancy between domestic popular support, or lack thereof, for sending arms to Ukraine and the official government position. Public backing for NATO commitments could erode, often stemming from a wider socio-historical context.

A commentary about support for Russia in Slovakia from the Polish Institute for Central Europe suggested: “An intuitive explanation may be that this is a generation that no longer had the experience of communism or the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops. After all, the last Red Army soldier left the country in 1991. This is also a generation that was born in a free country and does not associate Russia with danger.” (There have since been polling indications that pro-Ukrainian sentiment has risen.)

Are the Russians really the baddies, to use the British comedy act Mitchell and Webb’s term for bad guys, or are the Russians merely misunderstood? Russian disinformation campaigns present Russia as the defender of timeless European values, including family values, but

suggest the West cynically portrays it as a genocidal dictatorship to malign its essential purity. For disaffected voters in the West, this can be an appealing message since it echoes their anger with their own governments and with the US, which they blame for their problems.

It would be profoundly naïve to dismiss or downgrade the significant insider threat within NATO among voters who have intellectually defected from free market economics and open liberal democratic norms. This segment of the population seeks an alternative to rule by so-called economic elites, even when their governments do not. Russia seeks to lure them through cognitive warfare and disinformation. That Russia is itself the ultimate corrupt crony state run by illegitimate, thieving elites doesn't matter, because this tale is clouded by illusion, confusion, and disillusion.

NATO needs to think about this and think hard. The last time I looked at the ongoing work at NATO Science & Technology, not even one collaborative research group out of hundreds addressed insider threats.

The topic is uncomfortable and politically sensitive, but that doesn't remove the fact that NATO has an insider threat problem that warrants attention.

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