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Finland joining the NATO Alliance

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Why in News: Recently, Finland finally became the 31st country to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after applying last year.

A brief about NATO

NATO, or the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, was set up in 1949 by the US, Canada, and several western European nations to ensure their collective security against the Soviet Union. It was the US's first peacetime military alliance outside the western hemisphere.

NATO is headquartered in Brussels, Belgium. The headquarters of the Allied Command Operations is near Mons, also in Belgium.

Members of NATO are committed to mutual defence in response to an attack by any external party. Collective defence lies at the very heart of NATO, "a unique and enduring principle that binds its members together, committing them to protect each other and setting a spirit of solidarity within the Alliance".

This is laid out in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, the founding treaty of NATO.

North Atlantic Treaty, often referred to as the Washington Treaty, states the parties to the treaty seek to promote stability and well-being in the North Atlantic area.

The signatories affirm their faith in the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter and express their desire to live in peace with all people and governments, the treaty states.

"They are resolved to unite their efforts for collective defence and for the preservation of peace and security," the text of the treaty reads.

Article 10 of the treaty provides for entry of a new member to accede to the treaty by unanimous agreement of the existing members.

Expansion of NATO

Greece and Turkey were admitted in 1952, and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) in 1955. Spain joined in 1982, and in 1999, a decade after the collapse of the USSR, the former Soviet bloc countries of Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland became part of NATO.

Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined in 2004, Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020, taking the membership of the alliance to 30.

Process for securing NATO membership

Once the member countries have established consensus about a country's potential membership, it is called upon to initiate accession talks with the alliance

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MAP:

Following this, they may be invited to join the Membership Action Plan (MAP). Reaching this stage does not secure membership.

It is a preparatory mechanism providing advice, assistance and practical support tailored to the specific needs of applicant countries.

This process would conclude with the instituting of a formal timetable for the completion of prerequisite reforms. It may continue even after the applicant countries have become members.

The alliance draws a report annually providing feedback to the aspirant country about its progress in their annual national programmes, and identifying areas for further action.

The list of issues identified for discussion does not constitute criteria for membership and is intended to encompass those issues which the aspiring countries themselves have identified as matters which they wish to address

Confirmation of intent:

The process begins with NATO experts and representatives of the invited countries at the organisational headquarters in Brussels.

The idea is to obtain formal confirmation of the invitee's willingness and ability to meet the political, legal and military obligations and commitments of the NATO membership.

They are also expected to implement measures to protect the organisation's classified information and prepare their security and intelligence services to work with NATO Office of Security.

Issue of letter of intent: The second step of the process requires the applicant country to issue a formal letter of intent to NATO. This acts as a confirmation to the obligations and commitments of the organisation.

The amendments: It then moves to the necessary amendments to make the invitees party to the Washington Treaty followed by ratification of the applicant countries' constitutional protocols for facilitating the membership.

Acceding to the Treaty: The Secretary General would then call the potential new members to accede to the North Atlantic Treaty. This is after all NATO members notify their acceptance to the government of the United States, the depository of the Washington Treaty, about the applicant.

Membership confirmed: Following the invitee depositing their instruments of accession with the U.S. State Dept, the applicant becomes a member of the NATO.

Nature of Finland Security policy

Finland's experience during the Cold War shaped its approach to security policy. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it sought to build closer ties with Russia while also pursuing greater integration with Europe.

The country has been an active participant in European security initiatives such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO). At the same time, it has been able to maintain close economic ties with Russia.

However, there were tensions between Finland and Russia as a result of the flux in domestic politics in both countries.

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For instance, Nikita Khrushchev was willing to negotiate with Finland and allowed for increased trade and cultural exchange between the two countries, despite the 1950s seeing Finland side with the West when the Soviet Union called for a boycott of the 1956 Summer Olympics in Australia.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February last year convinced Sweden and Finland to ditch long-held policies of military non-alignment.

Both countries see NATO, with its collective defence clause, as the best way to ensure their security.

The majority of NATO members have quickly ratified their applications, arguing that Finland – which shares a 1,300-km (810-mile) border with Russia – and Sweden would strengthen the alliance in the Baltic.

After initial objections, the Turkish parliament gave its approval for Finnish membership

Significance of Finland joining NATO

For Finland, while the country is in a better position in terms of security, it is losing out on the significant trade and tourism revenue it was making from Russia, and from its position as the West's gateway to the East.

For NATO, the addition of Finland brings in a military trained to repel an attack from Russia, and, by doubling its border with the country, brings it in a better position to station weapons, including missile launchpads, closer to Russia.

For Russia, Finland's move has brought NATO closer to its doors, the very thing it most strenuously opposes, and the prevention of which it had cited as one of the reasons to invade Ukraine.

Alternatives to Finland

For Finland, an alternative to joining NATO could have been to develop its own military capabilities and pursue a deeper level of cooperation with other European countries, through arrangements like the CSDP and the NORDEFCO.

However, the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and a declining Russian influence made the decision for the risk-averse Finns easy.

The Way Ahead

The continuation of the Ukraine invasion, a declining Russian might, and now a confirmed security umbrella by NATO gives the impression that Finland's security concerns are mostly assuaged. The extent to which this new cooperation between the Finns and the NATO countries pan out will dictate Russia's actions, but it seems that Moscow, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, might wish to further escalate by increasing troop presence along the Russo-Finnish border.