

UK's role confirms Sweden/Finland NATO membership planned for years

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British imperialism has played a critical role over the last decade in deepening co-operation with Finland and Sweden as NATO “partners”, culminating in their decisions this week to formally join the military alliance.

In September 2014, David Cameron’s Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition hosted a summit of NATO in Wales that founded the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). Originally facilitated by Britain as the “framework nation”, it consisted of seven NATO allies which would assemble military forces among the northern and high regions of Europe. The “rapidly deployable force capable of conducting the full spectrum of operations, including high intensity operations” would “facilitate the efficient deployment of existing and emerging military capabilities and units.” In 2021, the UK’s Ministry of Defence (MoD) said of its remit, “The JEF is able to operate wherever in the world any two of its members choose to deploy together.”

There was no attempt to conceal the target of the JEF. Outlining a “NATO Readiness Action Plan” the summit declared, “It provides a coherent and comprehensive package of necessary measures to respond to the changes in the security environment *on NATO’s borders* and further afield that are of concern to Allies [emphasis added].” By that time, after well over a decade of NATO encroaching ever closer to Russia’s western border, “NATO’s borders” were a few hundred miles from St Petersburg and Moscow.

The Wales summit was held following the 2014 Maidan Square pro-Western coup in Ukraine, involving fascist forces, that led to the overthrow of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich and installed Petro Poroshenko.

In response, Russia annexed the Crimea and sent military forces into the eastern regions of Ukraine. The NATO summit declared, “This violation of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity is a serious breach of international law and a major challenge to Euro-Atlantic security,” adding, “Russia’s aggressive actions against Ukraine have fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace.”

The JEF was envisaged initially as a 10,000-strong force, with the *Financial Times* reporting at the time that it was created “to bolster NATO’s power in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine.”

The original seven countries were Britain, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Norway. It was made clear that the JEF was a NATO force in all but name. As an article in the

Belfast Telegraph noted in relation to this year’s JEF operations, “The force uses NATO standards and doctrine so it can operate in conjunction with the alliance, the United Nations or other multinational coalitions.”

It was critical for the ratcheting up of provocations against Russia that Sweden and Finland join the JEF. Both signed up in 2017. With their inclusion, the JEF became fully operational in 2018 when it began holding a series of military exercises and wargaming operations both independently and together with NATO.

The importance of the JEF for US and British imperialism as a Europe-based military force formally operating outside the orbit of the European Union (EU) was summed up by the Washington think tank, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). It noted last October, “The integration of the JEF Baltic Protector maritime task force into the U.S.-led BALTOPS 2019 exercise—an annual NATO-led exercise running since 1972—shows the potential utility of JEF in a nutshell: independent and flexible, but NATO-capable and scalable. As one Royal Navy commodore puts it, the JEF is a ‘force of friends, filling a hole in the security architecture of northern Europe between a national force and a NATO force.’”

In March 2021, the UK Ministry of Defence published its “Defence in a Competitive Age” review following its Integrated Review of foreign and defence policy. Central to British imperialism’s post-Brexit agenda, during a period of “Great Power conflict”, was “further developing the JEF (with Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and from spring 2021, Iceland) so that it offers these countries flexible options for managing sub-threshold competition as well as responding to crises, and improving its interoperability with NATO.”

On July 1 last year, Finland’s role as a leading force within the JEF was made clear by its hosting, for the first time, a meeting of JEF Defence Ministers.

At this year’s JEF Summit, held on February 22 at Belvoir Castle in England, tensions with Russia were stoked further. The 10 defence ministers of the participating countries declared that the JEF is “a group of like-minded and proactive nations, with shared purpose and values, and a common focus on security and stability in the High North, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea region.” They were united against “the build-up of Russian forces on the border with Ukraine, and further incursion in the Donbas region.” Two

days later Russia invaded Ukraine.

The summit confirmed the participation of the JEF alongside NATO in a series of anti-Russian exercises, which involved Finland and Sweden. These would take place in April, May and throughout 2023. UK Defence Minister Ben Wallace declared in an April 29 Ministry of Defence statement that they would see “our troops join forces with allies and partners across NATO and the Joint Expeditionary Force in a show of solidarity and strength in one of the largest shared deployments since the Cold War.”

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) noted, “The exercises will see 72 Challenger 2 tanks, 12 AS90 tracked artillery guns and 120 Warrior armoured fighting vehicles deploy to countries from Finland to North Macedonia....”

“Troops from B Squadron of the Queen’s Royal Hussars have deployed to Finland this week to take part in Exercise Arrow. They will be embedded into a Finnish Armoured Brigade, with participation from other partners including the US, Latvia and Estonia. The exercise will improve the ability of UK and Finnish troops to work alongside each other as part of the JEF, deterring Russian aggression in Scandinavia and the Baltic states.”

The statement announced details of Exercise Hedgehog, now underway, which involves Finnish and Swedish forces joining US and UK forces in NATO war games over the next weeks, including in Estonia, whose border with Russia is just 150 kilometres from Saint Petersburg.

The Belvoir Castle Summit was followed by another high-level JEF summit, held on March 14-15 in London and at the UK prime minister’s residence, Chequers. It was attended, the *Economist* reported, by “six leaders and other representatives of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)”. The magazine described the JEF as Boris Johnson’s “anti-Russia coalition,” noting, “The British-led Joint Expeditionary Force is moving quickly against Russia.”

Johnson described the following day what took place at the Chequers meeting, the magazine reported. “We agreed that Putin must not succeed in this venture,” he said. The *Economist* continued, “They agreed to ‘co-ordinate, supply and fund’ more arms and other equipment requested by Ukraine. And they declared that JEF, through exercises and ‘forward defence’, would seek to deter further Russian aggression—including provocations outside Ukraine that might stymie NATO or fall under its threshold.”

The importance of the JEF operating as a nominally non-NATO military force was again stressed. It was a “high-readiness force focused on the High North, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea regions... Unlike NATO, it does not need internal consensus to deploy troops in a crisis: Britain, the ‘framework’ nation, could launch operations with one or more partners. As one British officer puts it: ‘The JEF can act while NATO is thinking.’”

Under conditions of incessant provocations against Russia, including the funnelling of vast tranches of armaments to Ukraine, the JEF was to play a pivotal role.

The *Economist* noted that its nominal non-NATO status “makes it especially useful in murky circumstances. ‘It’s there to respond flexibly to all sorts of contingencies, maybe [those] that fall short of an Article Five threshold,’ says Mr Johnson, referring to NATO’s collective-defence clause. JEF matters because,

although Article Five covers ‘armed attack’, it is unclear whether lower-level or ambiguous provocations, such as the unmarked Russian soldiers who seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, would meet the threshold.”

The *Economist* cited Martin Hurt of the ICDS defence think-tank in Estonia explaining that the JEF is a “valuable complement” to NATO. “In the case of an attack in northern Europe, he says, JEF, alongside American forces, has the potential to become a first responder.”

Therefore, commented the *Economist*, “JEF has also become an important diplomatic and military instrument in responding to Russia’s war in Ukraine. British officials say that only a few weeks ago a London summit built around the force would have been unthinkable.”

Johnson said that the JEF “consists of the countries that were fastest off the blocks, with us, in sending direct military assistance to Ukraine.” The *Economist* noted that as the meeting took place, “Nine out of ten members are now supplying weapons (Iceland, which lacks a standing army, is the exception).”

Britain has provided Ukraine with more than 5,000 Next Generation light anti-tank (NLAW) weapons. These are developed and built in Belfast by Thales UK—a subsidiary of the French global conglomerate—from an original design by the Swedish defence giant Saab-Bofors.

Last month the MoD launched the UK’s Defence Contribution in the High North, which declared, “The Army has increased its cold weather training, including as part of its enhanced Forward Presence deployment in Estonia, where Army cold weather doctrine has been tested and refined alongside the Estonian Defence Forces. Army exercising with JEF partners, including Finland, Norway, and Sweden, enhances its cold weather capabilities, building on Royal Marine and Joint Helicopter Command expertise in the High North.”

Following the Belvoir Castle summit, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “The defence ministers’ statement emphasised, ‘The JEF is designed from first principles to be complementary to NATO’s Deterrence and Defence posture.’ That the JEF also includes two non-NATO members, Finland and Sweden, blows out of the water the lies of the US and its allies that the incorporation of Ukraine into NATO is a distant prospect, which Moscow is exaggerating in order to excuse its own aggression. The JEF’s military architecture already exists for Ukraine to be fully integrated into anti-Russia operations well before it is granted NATO membership.”

Within just three months, Finland and Sweden’s de facto membership of NATO will rapidly become de jure, with the JEF playing a crucial role on behalf of US and British imperialism in propelling their agenda aimed at regime change in Russia and the dismemberment of that vast country.



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