STUDY

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The Future of NATO

Sweden in NATO: 'Reliable, Loyal and Engaged'

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Content

Overview

'Sweden finds itself in a new era', foreign minister Tobias Billström noted in his statement to the *Riksdag* (the Swedish parliament) in February 2023. He continued: 'there is no other way to describe it. The rumblings of a large-scale war in Europe can be heard once again, and we are undergoing the greatest reappraisal of our foreign policy since we became a member of the European Union' (Billström, 2023). After two centuries of neutrality and non-alignment, Sweden has undergone its own *Zeitenwende*, applying to join NATO on 18 May 2022 together with its close Nordic ally Finland. The reason for this radical transformation of Swedish security policy was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Initially, however, the Social Democratic-led coalition government of Magdalena Andersson insisted that 'military non-alignment has served us well' and that 'the Government does not intend to apply for NATO membership' (Michalski et al, 2024). Nevertheless, once Finland decided to apply for NATO membership, the Swedish government concluded that it had no option but to apply for membership of the alliance as well. This decision was based on a realisation that the hollowing out of the Swedish defence forces since the end of the Cold War had left the country militarily vulnerable (Oscarsson, 2024; Wyss, 2011), as well as the fear that remaining outside the alliance would leave Sweden politically marginalised and strategically exposed. Finland became a full member on 4 April 2023, but Sweden's accession was delayed first by Turkey and later by Hungary. It was not until 7 March 2024 that Sweden was able to join the alliance.

The decisions made by Sweden and Finland to join NATO arguably represent the most consequential geostrategic outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Their respective memberships have greatly strengthened the alliance's deterrence strategy and collective defence in the Nordic and Baltic Sea region, as well as the Arctic and the High North, and created new opportunities for coherent defence planning and military integration along NATO's northeastern flank (Friis and Tamnes, 2023). For the first time since the end of the Kalmar Union in 1523, all Nordic countries are members of the same alliance, thereby opening up the possibility of far-reaching security cooperation and defence integration in the Nordic region. Swedish foreign minister Tobias Billström has argued that Sweden's decision to join the alliance 'is an epoch-making event for our country and entails a profound and immediate change in Sweden's foreign policy'. The accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO 'is one of the biggest geopolitical changes in Europe since the fall of the Berlin wall', and 'strengthens the European security architecture. With Sweden as a member, NATO will be stronger, developments in our neighbourhood will be more predictable and our neighbours will be more secure' (Billström, 2024b).

Sweden brings to the alliance a number of small but significant niche military capabilities across all warfighting (Deni, 2023). These include: a 7,000-strong army equipped with Leopard 2A tanks and CV90 IFVs, elements of which are trained to operate in Arctic conditions; over 100 JAS Gripen fighters, which are capable of short take-off and landing, and require relatively low maintenance; a navy trained in the shallow, brackish waters of the Baltic Sea and armed with some of the most advanced equipment in the world (including its stealth Visby-class corvettes and Gotland-class diesel-electric submarines); effective intelligence services and developed cyber capabilities; a well-developed and advanced defence-industrial sector; and a space program, including the Esrange Space Centre, which is Europe's only continental launch facility. Sweden's defence budget amounted to 2.4 % of its GDP in 2025 (making it the eighth highest overall spender in the alliance), and this will rise to 2.6 % in 2028 (according to current plans, although these are widely expected to change after the rupture in transatlantic relations in the spring of 2025).

Sweden joined the alliance without preconditions, and from the outset promised to be a 'reliable, loyal and engaged NATO ally' that would 'take on considerable responsibility in our neighbourhood and contribute to the security of all Allies via NATO's 360-degree approach and deterrence and defence posture' (Billström, 2024a). In October 2023, the Swedish government presented its commitments to NATO's deterrence and defence for the following year. These entailed the contribution of: a mechanised battalion to the Canadian-led Forward Land Forces in Latvia; six warships for NATO Standing Naval Forces; a fleet of 24 JAS Gripen fighter jets to NATO's air policing and response preparedness (25 % of the overall fighter fleet); and additional ground units, special forces, marines and naval vessels 'to certain other peacetime security-enhancing operations and activities' (Swedish Government, 2024). In September 2024, it was also announced that Sweden would become the framework nation for the establishment of a new Forward Land Forces presence in Finland, which will become operational in 2026.

One of the most striking features of Sweden's security and defence policy is the strong cross-party consensus underpinning it. As a small country, Sweden's political class has long

recognised that its security is best served by cultivating a consensual approach to security policy issues. As the then Foreign Minister Tobias Billström noted in his address to the *Riksdag* in March 2024, '[o]ur application was submitted by one Government, and now the process is being completed by another. [...] There is strong and broad political consensus on the foundations of Sweden's security policy as a NATO member. This is a great strength for our country' (Billström, 2024b). Support for joining NATO grew steadily over the preceding decade and once the Sweden Democrats and the Social Democrats dropped their commitment to military non-alignment and came out in favour of joining the alliance, a broad cross-party consensus was formed in the *Riksdag.* The exceptions to this consensus were the far-left *Vänsterpartiet* (Left Party) and *Miljöpartiet* (Green Party). Data on public opinion also confirmed broad support for Joining NATO, and this support remains solid (SOM, 2024).

There are, however, ongoing party-political disagreements on issues such as how to finance increased expenditure (with the Social Democrats favouring a tax on the wealthy), the terms and conditions of the Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States, and Sweden's approach to nuclear deterrence. Sweden benefits from a rich ecosystem of think tanks and non-governmental organisations engaged in analysing and debating Swedish security and defence policy. Some of these are close to the defence establishment, including FOI (Swedish Defence Research Agency), the *Försvarshögskolan* (Defence University), and the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences (KKrVA). Other think tanks have a broad remit to foreign and security policy. These include the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (*Utrikespolitiska Institutet*, UI), alongside more specialist think tanks such as SIEPS (the Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies), the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and the Folke Bernadotte Academy (*Folke Bernadotteakademien*), a governmental agency focused on peace, security and development. There are also a number of smaller think tanks with links to political parties and movements, including the Olof Palme International Centre (the Swedish labour movement's organisation for international cooperation), *Timbro* (a liberal think tank), the Stockholm Free World Forum (*Frivärld*), *Oikos* (linked to the radical right Sweden Democrats), and the Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society (SPAS, *Svenska Freds- och Skiljedomsföreningen*), the country's oldest and largest peace organisation.

The Swedish Assessment of the Strategic Situation

The invasion of Ukraine and the threat from Russia

There is a broad cross-party consensus in Sweden that Russia constitutes a long-term threat to Sweden, Europe and the rules-based international order. This was clearly articulated by Defence Minister Pål Jonson in January 2023: 'Europe is facing the greatest defence, foreign and security policy challenges since the Second World War'. 'Unfortunately, we need to be prepared for a long war. Russia's strategic goals remain unchanged', he explained, because a 'Russian victory in Ukraine would have catastrophic geostrategic, political and military consequences for us all.' (Jonson, 2023a).

Sweden has long viewed Russia as a threat to the security of the region. This concern with Russia's militarism and imperialist power aspirations is rooted deep in the history of Sweden, and can be traced back to the Great Northern War of the early eighteenth century. More recently, the Swedish government has viewed the growing authoritarianism, militarism and assertive foreign policy of the Putin regime with deepening concern. This perspective is reflected in public opinion polls in Sweden, which reflect a broad societal consensus that Russia constitutes the primary threat to the security of Sweden and Europe. As Pål Jonson noted in March 2023, 'we are facing a revisionist and increasingly authoritarian Russia that is eager to change the status quo of the post-Cold War era. This has been clear from the beginning. Shortly after his accession to power in 2000, Putin began imposing limits on freedom of speech and increasing state control over civil society. Over the past 15 years, Russia has invested heavily in its military capability and the state security apparatus – resulting in greater control over its population and an enhanced military posture and threat to its neighbours. Putin and his entourage have chosen to use military force as a means to restore Russia's status as a great power – or at least a 'light' version of the Russian or Soviet Empire' (Jonson, 2023b).

Whilst this analysis of Russia as a long-term strategic threat to Sweden and Europe is broadly supported in the *Riksdag*, by public opinion and within the think tank community, it is not unchallenged – particularly on the far left and far right. Some on the more radical fringe of the Swedish peace movement, for example, argue that Russia is a 'poorer state with a smaller population' than that of the EU and NATO, and blame the West for the Ukraine war – arguing that 'it's not NATO and the EU that should feel threatened, but Russia' (Friholt, 2024). It should be noted, however, that this pro-Russian perspective is a minority perspective even on the far left, and that the left-wing *Vänsterpartiet* (Left Party) has strongly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its 'indiscriminate warfare and targeting of civilians' as 'unprovoked, illegal and indefensible'. It has also supported tough sanctions against Moscow as well as Sweden's 'military, economic and humanitarian support for Ukraine' (Vänsterpartiet, 2025). On the populist radical right, some voices in the alternative media around the Sweden Democrats have made comments that have been seen as sympathetic to Russian interests, but SD party leader Jimmie Åkesson has moved swiftly to disassociate his party from such sentiments. The SD has also sought to distance itself from radical right parties in the European Parliament who are more sympathetic to Russia, and has been one of the most vocal critics of Russia among all Swedish parties in the EP (Bolin, 2023). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, SD leader Åkesson announced his party's support for joining NATO if Finland applied simultaneously. Since then, the SD has supported increased defence expenditure and an active role for Sweden in the alliance.

'There could be war'

The perception that Russia 'will remain a very serious threat to us and our Allies for the foreseeable future' (Jonson, 2025) has led to some very public warnings to the Swedish public that 'there could be war' (O'Dell, 2024). Each year in January, the non-governmental organisation *Folk och Försvar* (People and Defence) holds its annual conference in Sälen, which is attended by the political and defence elite, and by members of about fifty civil society organisations with an interest in defence issues. At the 2024 Sälen conference, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson stated that 'Sweden is not at war. But there is no peace either'. The Minister for Civil Defence, Carl-Oskar Bohlin, went further and declared that 'there could be war'. Both Defence Minister Pål Jonson and the chief of Sweden's defence forces, General Micael Bydén, echoed this and stressed that the Swedish population should mentally prepare for such a possibility. This led to a 3,500 % increase in visits to the civil defence agency's online bomb shelter map (MSB, *Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och bredskap,* the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency) and a 900 % increase in downloads of the pamphlet entitled '*If Crisis or War Comes*'. The Swedish children's rights organization, *Bris*, also reported a surge in calls to their mental

health hotline. Whilst there was no significant challenge to this assessment of the threats facing the country, the leader of the main opposition party, Magdalena Andersson, suggested that the bluntness of the message was 'divisive' and ineffective (BBC, 2024).

Despite some differences on how the threat is communicated to the public, there is nonetheless broad political and societal consensus in Sweden that Europe is facing its greatest challenge since the Second World War, and that Russia will present a growing and long-term threat 'for the foreseeable future' (Billström, 2024c). More generally there is a deepening sense in Sweden that the international system is undergoing a profound and far-reaching process of structural transformation, with increasing geopolitical competition, the weakening of global governance and the rules-based liberal order, and the emergence of a new bloc of revisionist powers including Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. The catalyst for this fracturing of the global order has been Russia's unprovoked, brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine. This was made clear by Defence Minister Pål Jonson in a speech given in March 2023, in which he argued that the invasion of Ukraine was a watershed for Europe, which would have 'severe and lasting consequences for the European security landscape'. Moreover, he continued, 'we must be mindful that we are in the midst of a process of structural change, and have humility as we face an unknown future. Whatever it may hold, the world will not be as we knew it before 24 February 2022. Russia's war against Ukraine will leave its mark on European security for generations to come' (Jonson, 2023b).

Confronting the Russian threat: Sweden and NATO

Sweden has joined NATO at a time when the alliance itself is undergoing a far-reaching transformation of its strategic purpose, structural organisation and military doctrine. It is in this context that the Swedish Armed Forces are undertaking the most far-reaching transformation in their structure, capabilities and doctrine since the end of the Cold War. As General Jonny Lindfors (the head of the Swedish Army) has argued, the defence forces are confronting the urgent need to expand and transform because of three factors: the acute threat to Sweden and Europe posed by Russia; Sweden's NATO membership, which means that the country's armed forces will be deployed outside of the country; and a far-reaching revolution in military affairs driven by technological and tactical innovations pioneered in the war in Ukraine (Lindfors, 2024).

The three circles of Sweden's security strategy

Swedish security policy is constructed around three concentric circles: national defence; Nordic-Baltic cooperation, including the UK-led JEF (Joint Expeditionary Force) and, more recently, Poland; and NATO and transatlantic cooperation. Sweden recognises that – in accordance with Article 3 of the Washington Treaty – it needs to boost its own national defence capabilities as an urgent priority. 'We cannot sit and wait for anyone to solve our security issues', Major Johan Hellström (the chief of the largest Home Guard units, the Västerbotten Regiment) has noted: '[w]e must deal with [them] ourselves by building our total defence, military defence and preparedness' (High North News, 2024).

In this respect, the island of Gotland is of critical geostrategic importance. Situated in the middle of the Baltic Sea, it is vitally important for NATO operations in the region. 'Whoever controls Gotland controls the Baltic Sea', the head of the Swedish Armed Forces, General Micael Bydén, has argued (The Times, 2024). After the end of the Cold War the island was demilitarised, but the Gotland regiment is currently being reconstituted and is expected to reach full combat readiness in 2030.

Swedish defence planning is based on quinquennial reports by the Defence Commission, which serves as a forum for consultations between the government and all parties in the *Riksdag* (Swedish Government, 2024b), aiming to foster a broad cross-party consensus on defence. The report issued in April 2024 (*Strengthened defence capabilities, Sweden as an Ally* Ds2024:6) was the most important for over a decade and outlined the main priorities for the period 2025-2030. These included: an expansion of the army to three mechanised brigades and one infantry brigade, with an increase in conscription and enhanced territorial defence units; the expansion of the Swedish Royal Navy; increased air and missile defences; and a rejuvenation of civil defence within the 'total defence' (*Totalförsvaret*) concept.

Sweden's second strategic priority is to strengthen regional defence cooperation and integration, both with Nordic allies (above all Finland) and within the framework of the NB8 (Nordic-Baltic 8). 'It is no secret that this government will have a clear focus on Sweden's neighbourhood in light of the new security environment', foreign minister Tobias Billström noted in February 2023. 'The Nordic family forms one of the world's oldest and most closely knit regional cooperation structures', he added, and the government has been committed to deepening cooperation with the Baltic states within the framework of the NB8 (Billström, 2023; see also *Frivärld*, 2024).

Swedish defence planners do not see the country as a frontline state – with the exception of Gotland – but as a country that, as Defence Minister Jonson has noted, 'brings strategic depth to the Alliance' and 'will connect the eastern NATO countries to the Atlantic'. He also underlined that 'we view the Baltic Sea Region, together with the High North and the North Atlantic, as one single strategic area' (Jonson, 2023b). Cooperation between the air forces of the four Nordic countries is now well developed and there are debates underway on integrating plans for mobilisation and warfighting between land forces (Edström and Ångström, 2024).

Maritime cooperation in the region is also well developed with Finland and in the NATO framework, and the creation of the *CTF Baltic (Commander Task Force Baltic)* in Rostock in October 2024 has opened up prospects for much greater cooperation with the German navy in the Baltic-Nordic region. Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk took part in the NB8 summit in December 2024 for the first time, where he proposed joint naval patrols in the Baltic Sea – which was welcomed in Sweden as reflecting a new Polish interest in deepening defence cooperation with its Nordic and Baltic NATO allies. Sweden is also seeking to develop a new security policy dialogue within the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS), which includes the NB8 as well as Poland and Germany. Of particular importance for regional defence cooperation is the UK-led JEF, which was explicitly designed as a 'first responder' force able to act 'whilst NATO is thinking' (Heier, 2019). Sweden participated in the JEF operation 'Nordic Warden' in January 2025, which is aimed at safeguarding critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea.

The JEF is also important because it links to the third circle of Swedish security and defence policy: European and transatlantic deterrence efforts. This provides the most important layer of strategic deterrence, linking Europe with the United States and NATO. Even before applying for NATO membership, successive Swedish governments have recognised that it is NATO, not the EU, that is the key institution for collective security in Europe, and that transatlantic security cooperation provides the bedrock and backbone of the European security order. Sweden joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994 and in 2014 became an 'enhanced partner', signing a Host Nation Support agreement with the alliance. Sweden also explicitly views the United States as one of its 'most important security and defence policy partners, bilaterally and within NATO', and remains committed to deepening this bilateral defence cooperation. There is extensive defence-industrial cooperation with the United States, and Sweden has also established a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the US. This came into effect in August 2024, and is described by the government as 'a lynchpin of our relations with the United States', which 'enhances the security of both Sweden and the United States' and 'contributes heavily to stability in our neighbourhood' (Billström, 2024c).

The DCA has generated some controversy, however, with the Social Democrats raising concerns about the freedom of action it gives US forces and about access to 17 Swedish bases and training areas – criticisms that were forcefully made by the traditionally NATO-sceptical *Vänsterpartiet* (Left Party) and *Miljöpartiet* (Green Party). More generally, there has been deep unease in Sweden across the political spectrum and within the security community about the implications of the Trump administration's attempt to impose a peace settlement on Ukraine, normalise relations with Moscow and detach itself from Europe's security architecture. The irony of having joined NATO just as Trump has cast doubts on his administration's commitment to Article V security guarantees has not been lost on Swedish commentators and is widely debated in the Swedish media. Sweden's media and think tank community have also been highly critical of Trump's aggressive diplomacy towards Denmark over Greenland, which has further fuelled disillusionment with Trump's foreign policy. These debates can be followed in weekly summaries published online by the Swedish Development Forum (FUF) (see for example FUF 2025).

Transatlantic relations and European defence cooperation

Like other members of the NB8, Sweden is a strong advocate of the transatlantic security partnership, but it is also committed to deeper security and defence cooperation within the EU. Since the mid-1990s, Sweden has taken part in nearly all NATO and EU CSDP missions, and 'sees no contradiction between a stronger EU and a stronger NATO. We intend to be fully engaged in both organisations. We want to be at the heart – not on the fringes – of the CSDP and we strongly believe that our future NATO membership will make us better able to play an active and constructive role in European defence matters' (Jonson 2023a). The Swedish government has encouraged 'deeper and more-effective EU-NATO cooperation' and is also in favour of closer relations between the EU and the UK after Brexit. As foreign minister Maria Malmer Stenergard noted in her 2025 report to the *Riksdag*, 'Sweden's close relationship with the United Kingdom is important, particularly with respect to security policy. We are also actively seeking to enhance cooperation at EU level, and we look forward to the UK-EU summit in May' (Malmer Stenergard, 2025).

In the light of the unpredictability and idiosyncratic nature of the Trump administration's policy on NATO and transatlantic relations, the Swedish government's approach has focused on seeking to preserve the US security relationship – both bilaterally and in the NATO framework – while emphasising the urgency of developing the European pillar of NATO. The Swedish government seeks to deepen European defence cooperation through strengthening defence integration within frameworks such as NORDEFCO, the NB8, JEF and the EU, which 'needs to develop into a stronger and more coherent geopolitical actor' (Jonson, 2023a). In the Swedish think tank community, there is a widely perceived need for a stronger and more geopolitical Europe that takes greater responsibility for European security within the framework of the overall Euro-Atlantic security architecture. This is best done, it is believed, in close cooperation with partners around Europe and across the Atlantic. Nonetheless, there is also broad consensus that the transatlantic pillar remains the cornerstone of European security, and that it is NATO – not the EU – which is the key institutional bulwark of collective defence (see for example Dahl, 2025; Engberg, 2025; Wieslander and Blomqvist, 2025; Riddervold, 2024).

China and the Indo-Pacific Region

'Even though Ukraine will be, and should be, at the top of our agenda', Defence Minister Pål Jonson has argued, 'other challenges to Europe's security have not disappeared. Increased great-power competition, an increasingly assertive and aggressive China on the international stage, the growing presence of the Wagner group in Sub-Sahara Africa, to mention but a few.' (Jonson, 2023a). 'The Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific regions are more inter-linked than ever before', he has argued (Jonson, 2024; see also von Essen, 2024). He has also referred to Chinese, Iranian and North Korean support for Russian belligerence, which, he has argued, 'shows that this is a war with global consequences that ultimately weakens the rules-based order. The fact that North Korean soldiers are now fighting on the European continent for the first time makes this all too apparent' (Jonson, 2025).

Pål Jonson has noted that as a global trading nation, Sweden is reliant 'on good trading relations with partners around the world. Therefore, safe sea lines of communication and freedom of navigation are core security interests to us.' Sweden is a participant in the Shangri-La Dialogue, which involves defence ministers from countries in the Indo-Pacific region, North America and Europe, and has contributed to EU maritime initiatives in the North-Western Indian Ocean and the Horn of Africa (including EUNAVFOR Atalanta and Aspides). In 2024 the government published a '*Defence Policy Direction for Cooperation with Countries in the Indo-Pacific Region*', which outlined its strategic priorities and approaches to defence engagement with partner countries in the region (Swedish Ministry of Defence, 2024). Sweden is particularly interested in developing defence-industrial cooperation, especially with countries such as Japan, Australia, the Philippines, Singapore and South Korea.

Sweden's relationship with China is particularly difficult to manage. In her 2025 report to the *Riksdag*, Foreign Minister Malmer Stenergard noted that the Asia-Pacific region is 'where the greatest economic growth is expected' and that 'the security of Asia and that of Europe are becoming increasingly interlinked' (Malmer Stenergard, 2025). Managing the complex balancing act between 'equal trade' with China and cooperation on issues such as climate change at a time of deepening US-China tension will be a major challenge for Sweden in the future. The government's approach involves anchoring its bilateral relations firmly within an EU and transatlantic framework – although how to juggle the tensions in this trilateral relationship is not yet clear (Zhang, 2024; Börfesson, 2023). Sweden is a strong supporter of a free trade agreement between the EU and India. It is also looking to intensify 'its cooperation with Japan, which is an important partner country to NATO and a significant export market'. To strengthen its presence in the Indo-Pacific region, Sweden is to appoint a Stockholm-based envoy for the region, to help it navigate the complex balancing act between trade, security, democracy and human rights.

The War in Ukraine, Trump and the Future of Europe

'Whether Europe will consist of sovereign states in the future is being determined on the battlefields of Ukraine', Foreign Minister Stenengard has argued, adding that 'Russia's goal is to impose a sphere of influence with vassals and satellites – including in the Baltic Sea region' (Malmer Stenergard, 2025). Russia's desire to crush an independent Ukraine and prevent it developing closer cooperation with the EU and NATO is seen as reflective of the Putin regime's fear that a 'successful, democratic and prosperous Ukraine' would 'set an unacceptable example for the Russian people. If change is possible in Ukraine, it is possible in Russia'. Consequently, 'anything short of a strategic defeat in Ukraine would only embolden Russia to continue to pursue its agenda at the expense of others. Russia's successes would merely encourage further aggression, leaving countries like Moldova and Georgia in an even more dangerous situation', as stated by Defence Minister Pål Jonson in March 2023 (Jonson, 2023b).

The Swedish government fears that a strategic victory for Putin in Ukraine could lead to subsequent threats to countries such as Moldova and Georgia, as well as to EU and NATO countries in the Nordic-Baltic region and Eastern Europe. Consequently, 'support for Ukraine is the Government's top foreign policy priority', as Foreign Minister Malmer Stenergard has argued. Stenergard continues that, '[f]or Sweden, support to Ukraine is a moral obligation and an indispensable investment in Europe's and – by extension – our own security, independence and future. Sweden will continue to provide political, humanitarian, military and financial support to Ukraine for as long as it takes' (Malmer Stenergard, 2025). This policy enjoys strong support in the Swedish population, with over 70 % of Swedes supporting the provision of both economic and military aid – more than the EU average (European Union, 2022). Swedish military aid has included everything from anti-tank weapons and CV90 IFVs to winter gear and medical supplies. Unlike some other contributors, in 2023 Sweden signalled that it had no objections to the use of its weapons against targets in Russian territory. Sweden has increased its support to Ukraine each year of the war, and the military aid package announced in January 2025 is its largest ever.

In March 2025, Sweden announced that it would contribute to NATO's enhanced air policing in Poland to strengthen air surveillance and the protection of NATO airspace around the logistics corridors crucial to the provision of military and civil support to Ukraine. Sweden will deploy up to eight JAS-39 Gripen fighter jets under NATO command, which is the first time that Swedish combat aircraft will take part in airspace surveillance from the territory of another ally. Defence Minister Jonson has also stressed that Europe should be involved in any future peace negotiations, and that 'there can be no talking about Ukraine without Ukraine'. The Swedish government has stressed that Russia should not have a veto on NATO membership, and that Ukraine should continue to have a 'membership perspective, even if it is not going to happen tomorrow' (Breaking Defense, 2025).

Looking ahead, Sweden has been involved in UK and French-led discussions for a 'coalition of the willing' to potentially provide a peacekeeping force for Ukraine and promote European stabilisation. Both Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson and Foreign Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard have indicated a willingness to contribute troops to an eventual peacekeeping force, but the Foreign Minister has also stressed the need to first 'negotiate a fair and sustainable peace that respects international law, that respects Ukraine and that ensures above all else that Russia can't just withdraw and regroup and attack Ukraine or another country within a few years'. 'When we have such a peace in place', she added, 'it will need to be maintained, and for that our government is not ruling out anything' (CBS, 2025).

Some in the think tank community, however, have warned that Trump's peace plan 'sets up Ukraine and Europe for failure', and fails to provide adequate security guarantees for Ukraine, thereby 'undermining the credibility of NATO, and unravelling the European security order' (Wessler 2025). Writing for the think tank SIEPS, Katarina Engberg has also noted that Ukraine has 'no short-term prospect for NATO membership', and that the best arrangement would therefore be bilateral security guarantees from Europe along with the gradual integration of Ukraine into the EU (Engberg, 2025: 24-5). Overall, there is a broad consensus that transatlantic relations have deteriorated sharply after Trump's re-election, and that NATO faces a deep and possibly terminal crisis (Riddervold, 2024). This has stoked anti-American sentiments (particularly on the left) and led to doubts about both the decision to join NATO and bilateral defence cooperation with the United States. Critics have focused specifically on the DCA with the United States, which grants the US military broad-ranging access to 17 Swedish military installations, parts of which are reserved exclusively for the US. Nonetheless, there is also a broad middle-ground that recognises that Europe will be dependent on US military capabilities for at least a decade, and that Europeans must spend more on defence and take on more responsibility for their own security and defence (Dahl, 2025; Wieslander and Blomqvist, 2025).

Sweden, NATO and nuclear weapons

The most contentious issue in the Swedish public and think tank discourse on security policy is the issue of nuclear weapons (Juntunen and Rosengren 2024). Sweden gave up its nuclear weapons programme in 1968, and since then has been committed to non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament. This sentiment is still strong in parts of the Social Democratic party and other parties on the left, as well as being deeply entrenched in much of academia and the cultural elite. It was the reason why the *Vänsterpartiet* and the *Miljöpartiet* were both critical of the decision to join NATO and became a source of contention around the DCA agreement with the United States. There is a strong anti-nuclear weapons lobby based around organisations and think tanks such as the *Svenska Freds* (SPAS), the *Alva Myrdal Centre on Nuclear Disarmament* at Uppsala University, the *Folke Bernadotte Academy* and SIPRI. The issue has been debated in the Swedish media, including *Dagens Nyheter (*29 January 2025) and the online journal *Kvartal* (11 March 2025), but the issue has primarily been discussed in terms of a principled opposition to nuclear weapons in general. To date, there has been little informed public discussion of the strategic and defence implications of nuclear deterrence and nuclear strategy in Sweden. There has, however, been discussion of nuclear deterrence issues within the security community, including the Defence College and the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences (Lundin and Sahl, 2025).

The government has sought to limit controversy on the issue by stressing that although Sweden 'supports NATO's strategic deterrence' and 'applied to join NATO without reservations' (i.e., without explicitly banning the deployment of nuclear weapons on Swedish territory), the government 'remains committed to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation' and will 'continue to actively participate in the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament'. Foreign minister Billström added that 'as in the other Nordic countries, there is no reason to have nuclear weapons or permanent bases on Swedish territory in peacetime' (Billström, 2023). In May 2023, however, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson noted that '[i]n a war situation it's a completely different matter', and 'would depend entirely on what would happen. In the absolute worst-case scenario, the democratic countries in our part of the world must ultimately be able to defend themselves against countries that could threaten us with nuclear weapons'. Nonetheless, he insisted, this would be a decision taken by the Swedish government, not the United States': 'Sweden decides over Swedish territory' (Euractiv 2024).

Grey-zone aggression and hybrid warfare

In an interview with the German media organisation RND, the Commander of the Swedish Armed Forces, Micael Bydén, stated that although at present Sweden does not see direct Russian military aggression as an immediate threat, it is very concerned 'with other operations, such as disinformation, smear campaigns and cyberattacks, that is to say, with other non-military provocations' (RND, 2024). 'Russia', Defence Minister Jonson has noted, 'is using hybrid attacks to target Sweden and many other countries', and '[w]e must assume that Russia will remain a very serious threat to us and our Allies for the foreseeable future' (Jonson, 2025). The Putin regime, he notes, sees itself engaged in 'an existential fight against the West', hence Russia waging this war in all the ways it has, including hybrid and asymmetric threats. Given the costs of its aggression against Ukraine and regardless of its outcome, 'Russia will be economically and militarily weakened. Its western-facing military units are largely depleted of personnel and equipment. Russia's military capability will therefore be limited for the foreseeable future, so we can expect Russia to pursue non-linear methods to achieve its political aims. [These] may include information campaigns to influence public opinion and political decision-making, blackmailing and sabotage. Russia has also repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons' (Jonson, 2023b).

Within the Baltic Sea region, grey-zone aggression is particularly evident in the deliberate damaging of critical underwater infrastructure (including fibre-optic cables and energy pipelines), the jamming of GPS signals, violations of airspace, and the use of Russia's 'ghost fleet' for sanctions busting, espionage and sabotage (Ålander, 2025; Ålander and Oksanen, 2024). The head of the Swedish Security Service (*Säpo,* the *Säkerhetspolisen*), Charlotte von Essen, underlined the threat in March 2025 and noted 'that Russia's risk-taking tendency has increased in its threats to carry out sabotage also in Sweden' (SÄPO, 2025). The Swedish Navy is actively engaged in maritime surveillance operations, contributing to both NATO's Baltic Sentry operation (providing up to three warships and a radar surveillance aircraft) and the UK-led JEF operation 'Nordic Warden'.

Summary

Sweden is NATO's newest member, and since joining the alliance it has sought to position itself as a 'reliable, loyal and engaged ally', willing and able to contribute to NATO's 360-degree approach to deterrence and defence. There is a broad consensus in Swedish society and politics that Russia constitutes the most serious and long-term threat to Sweden and Europe. Whilst a direct military attack on Swedish territory cannot be excluded, it is not seen as the main threat at present. The most pressing concern is perceived to be Russian grey-zone aggression and hybrid activities in the Baltic Sea region, 'antagonistic actions aimed at destabilising our societies, such as cyberattacks, disinformation and the sabotage of critical infrastructure' (Malmer Stenergard, 2025). These have been growing in intensity and frequency.

Sweden is a strong supporter of transatlantic security cooperation and is deeply concerned about the direction and instincts of the Trump administration. Sweden is also a supporter of the EU, which is viewed as the country's 'most important foreign policy platform'. However, Sweden believes that European defence cooperation should include non-EU members (like the UK and Norway) and contribute to the strengthening of the European pillar of NATO, and is therefore sceptical of French concepts of European strategic autonomy focused on the EU. Sweden has been a strong supporter of Ukraine, stressing the importance of credible security guarantees for Ukraine and a continued membership perspective for NATO (without, however, publicly defining precisely what this would mean). The Swedish government has already signalled a willingness to contribute to a European post-conflict stabilisation and a peace-keeping force in Ukraine once peace is secured. Nuclear weapons remain a potentially divisive issue in the Swedish security policy debate, but at present this has not impacted Sweden's strong commitment to NATO and the transatlantic security partnership.

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The Future of NATO – Country Report Sweden

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 4 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

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