



Sweden's thorny path into NATO: a changing country is finding its new place

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Summary

On 7 March 2024, Sweden joined NATO after almost two years waiting for Turkey's and Hungary's approval.

Sweden's difficulties joining NATO due to Turkish and Hungarian resistance and its ambivalent reactions to related pressure were symptomatic for the country's cumbersome switch from its normative non-aligned foreign and security policy towards a more conventional hard security and collective defence policy.

Along those lines, the country's self-perception and role as an international actor has changed significantly within only two years.

Sweden quickly adapted to its new role as a NATO member, prepared involvement in NATO operations, stepped up military support for Ukraine and increased military spending, strengthening its armed forces significantly.

This matches Norway's recent plans for enhancing its defence, facilitating even closer Nordic cooperation, especially in the High North.

During the Cold War, Sweden opted for (armed) neutrality in order to be able to act and mediate more freely between the Western and Eastern blocs. Even after the end of the Cold War, Sweden saw no need to join NATO. Instead, multilateral dialogue, mediation and disarmament became the country's top foreign policy priorities. Nonetheless, Sweden's status changed from non-aligned when joining the European Union (EU) in 1995. It committed itself to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and entered a partnership with NATO. Until joining NATO, Sweden's security package consisted of several elements of international cooperation that in combination with enhancing its own defence capabilities have been continuously expanded since 2014. These included a more active role in a stronger CSDP, close relations with NATO, bilateral defence agreements with neighbouring countries and the USA and regional security formats (Nordic Defence Cooperation).

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the security situation, threat perception and attitude towards NATO membership changed significantly. While the NATO debate emerged fast, then social democratic Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson still spoke out against joining NATO out of a fear that such a move could further destabilize the security situation in Northern Europe due to the backlash expected from Russia. Only two months later, she saw no alternative after having assessed various other options: non-alignment had served Sweden well so far, but this would not be adequate in the future. On 18 May 2022, the Swedish Parliament decided to hand-in a membership application with a clear majority alongside Finland.

Obstacles on Sweden's way into NATO

Most NATO member states ratified Sweden's application quickly. Only Turkey and Hungary showed opposition. While the Hungarian government disapproved of Swedish criticism of political developments in Hungary, Turkey was opposed due to Sweden's support for Kurdish organisations and its arms embargo against the country. To smooth Turkey's resistance, Sweden and Finland concluded a trilateral agreement with Turkey in June 2022, including the renunciation of all support for Kurdish organizations, the lifting of the arms embargo and a swift review of Turkish extradition requests for Kurdish terror suspects. Sweden even adopted a new, tougher anti-terrorism law, which came into force on 1 June 2023. According to this law, prosecution is already possible when supporting and making donations to a terror organisation. The government also withdraw its support from the Syrian-Kurdish militia Yekîneyên Parastina Gel and its political arm, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat.

But Sweden's efforts still appeared to be insufficient for President Recep Tayip Erdoğan. He continuously voiced new demands that were almost impossible to fulfil, such as the extradition of an ever-increasing number of Kurds, some of whom with Swedish citizenship, and several that were unrelated to the case, such as a resumption of EU accession negotiations. Making matters worse, several incidents of public burning and desecration of the Quran, in Sweden protected by freedom of expression, occurred in 2023, also feeding Turkey's resistance. Nonetheless, President Erdogan gave his oral consent the night before the Vilnius NATO Summit in July 2023 after having been granted more concessions from Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, such as presenting a roadmap for Sweden's continued fight against terrorism

and strengthening their countries' economic cooperation. Still, ratification by the Turkish Parliament was only completed in late January 2024. Even then, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban hesitated and made a visit by Kristersson, a precondition for Hungary's approval. Eventually, Kristersson agreed on such meeting and approved a major defence package including the delivery of Saab Gripen fighter planes to Hungary. Shortly after, the Hungarian Parliament approved Sweden's accession bid and Sweden joined NATO on 7 March 2024.

Shifting foreign and security policies and public opinion

Turkey's and Hungary's blocking of Sweden's NATO membership had nothing to do with Sweden's readiness to join NATO but with these countries' requirements and sensitivities that were partly related to Sweden, mainly the Kurdish issue, but also to NATO in general. Although the previous Swedish government was more reluctant to engage in a NATO debate and to start accession preparations than Finland initially, the country was not slower and worse prepared in the accession process which developed further in parallel in both countries.

Still, Sweden's difficulties joining NATO due to Turkish and Hungarian resistance and its ambivalent reactions to their demands, were symptomatic of Sweden's cumbersome switch from its traditional normative and value-based foreign and security policy towards a more conventional hard security and collective defence policy. The former had mainly focused on peacebuilding, disarmament and human and minority rights. This shift was especially difficult for left-wing parties and the peace movement. They were critical of not only joining NATO but also giving in to Turkish demands and halting support for the Kurdish minority in Turkey. With the new anti-terrorism act, Kurds in Sweden feared being expelled to Turkey and prosecuted.

In a poll for Swedish Radio in March 2024, 55 percent of the population considered the conditions agreed with Turkey for NATO-membership was too high a price to pay. The then spokeswoman of the Green party, Märta Stenevi, complained in July 2023 that Sweden is no longer a voice for freedom and democracy but a silent partner of an authoritarian regime. Indeed, hardly any new criticism of the human rights and democratic situation in Turkey and Hungary has been expressed by official sources in order to not disturb the sensitive relations even further in this situation. According to Swedish daily Dagens Nyheter on 11 July 2023, with NATO

accession Sweden is entering a world in which security related interests sometimes have a higher priority than democracy. Observers also wondered whether it has been worth giving up the overall well-working principle of neutrality and non-alignment only to join an alliance with autocratic states which do not share Swedish values, as well as leaders such as Erdogan, Orban and possibly soon again Donald Trump. Shortly after Hungary's approval, the peace organisation Svenska freds contended that while NATO membership was uncritically presented as a boon for Sweden's security, in fact it entailed a "risky misprioritisation that will lead to increased tension, polarisation and militarisation at a time where we need the exact opposite", namely sustainable peace and security.

Nonetheless, public support for NATO membership increased due to the growing threat perception since early 2022. Polling showed support for accession at around 40 percent in January 2022 and 55 percent at the time of applying in May 2022. Support further increased up to 66 percent when Sweden joined in March. Still, NATO support grew faster and was much higher in Finland, polling at 75 percent when applying and at 80 percent when joining NATO in April 2023. While the Swedish polls showed growing support, they also highlighted tensions. A Novus poll of 12 March 2024 established that in Sweden only 43 percent agree with Swedish troops being sent abroad with 34 percent against. It seems that now many hail the benefits of NATO membership but not its obligations. This could imply domestic disputes should the government be requested to support, for example, one of the Baltic countries on the ground in case of a crisis. Thus, Swedish public opinion remains divided, the old left-right cleavages in security matters have not disappeared but changed. For instance, the Green party took a more pragmatic position after joining NATO by accepting membership and not striving for withdrawal from NATO but critically observing further developments.

The shift from the social-democratic led minority government to a conservative-liberal one, tolerated by the far-right Sweden Democrats, in October 2022 overall facilitated and accelerated the Swedish policy turn. NATO membership is more in line with these parties' foreign and security policy thinking and more important for them. While still in power, the Social Democrats were keen to preserve a vision of norms and values in the new foreign and security policies even as a NATO member and to link NATO-membership with social democratic

policy and Swedish core values. However, the conservative-liberal government implemented the general shift from Sweden's traditional value-based and normative foreign and security policies towards more pragmatic and interest-based ones in a more consequent manner. This is exemplified by its strong commitment towards the agreement with Turkey, its abandonment of the social-democratic feminist foreign policy, its reductions in development aid and a weaker commitment to human and minority rights globally. Sweden is in fact reducing its presence on the world stage but focusing much more on protecting its own national interests, territorial security and its immediate neighbourhood.

Sweden finding its place in NATO

Its new allies praised Sweden for its policy shift and new security stance which is more in line with the other Nordic countries, facilitating closer Nordic security cooperation. Sweden's position among the Nordic countries is changing from the somewhat different "big brother" to "equal among others". Its strong military force, especially air force and submarine fleet, and defence industry, raised high expectations for Sweden to even take on a leadership role in some domains in the Baltic Sea area and the Arctic. While Sweden is still in the process of integrating into NATO's political and military structures and defence planning, it has made quick progress in many areas.

One key element is military spending. Between 2020 and 2024, Sweden's annual defence budget doubled. While first set for 2028 and then for 2026 by the new government, the NATO goal to spend 2 percent of the GDP on defence was already met in spring 2024 (2,14 percent). The Defence Commission, a consultative body consisting of members of Government and Parliament, suggested in its total defence report in April to increase the annual defence budget gradually with 52,8 billion SEK up to 185 billion in 2030. It remains however unclear where the extra money should come from, given other areas also require investments such as infrastructure, healthcare and police.

Furthermore, Sweden has decided to steadily increase the total number of troops. The annual number of recruits is planned to increase from 8000 currently to 10000 in 2030 and 12000 in 2032, providing Sweden with one of the largest reserve forces in NATO, matching similar developments in Norway and Finland. Two new brigades are to be established and two new garrisons will be set up in Northern Sweden.

NATO and Norway in particular might benefit from Sweden's increasing Arctic engagement and presence. That both countries plan to invest heavily in new equipment and personnel, especially in their High North, could facilitate their closer cooperation in terms of division of labour, military planning and troops transport in this strategically important but challenging area.

Sweden also stepped up its financial support for Ukraine. Two new support packages worth 13,3 respectively 4,6 billion SEK were adopted in June and September 2024, including ammunition, armoured and transport vehicles, airborne surveillance and control aircrafts. To strengthen NATO's Deterrence and Defence, Sweden will make an armed force available to NATO. It prepares to send a brigade of up to 1000 soldiers to the multinational NATO Forward Land Force in Latvia by 2025, participate with F17 fighter jets in NATO's air surveillance mission above the Baltic countries and contribute naval vessels to NATO's Standing Naval Forces. Mid-September 2024, Sweden announced its intension to accept a leading role in the implementation of a new NATO Forward Land Force presence in Finland as from 2026, tightening the bond between the two neighbours. Sweden will also provide exercise and training facilities for ground troops, navy and air force from allied countries.

Also, the EU-NATO dimension is important from a Swedish perspective. As EU Council chair in 2023, Sweden promoted sharpening the EU's CSDP, developing the EU's Strategic Compass and

closer cooperation between the EU and NATO. With Sweden, a key information point for Norway's EU relations, now being in NATO, Norway could benefit from Sweden's close involvement in the CSDP and its commitment to enhanced EU-NATO cooperation.

These developments strongly suggest that Sweden is taking its new role and obligations as a NATO member seriously. Its change and adaptation process has come a long way, but it still needs to answer several important questions, for example about its position on NATO's nuclear defence and deterrence and the deployment of nuclear weapons on Swedish ground. The latter is strictly opposed by left-wing parties and the peace movement. While also the government is against it in principal, it has refused to put non-deployment into law so far. Also, the increased need for defence spending will require sacrifices in other areas. All these could cause domestic conflicts; defence could be played out against societal and social issues. Therefore, it will be important to involve the NATO critics in the public discourse, to confront the criticism and demonstrate that Swedish values such as peace, democracy and equality are not opposed to NATO, that Sweden can be a force for good in the organization and NATO can be a force for Swedish values. Sweden needs to adapt to the new realities, but the change does not need to go as far that all its previous commitments and values be cast aside.

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