



# spotlight

## SWEDEN'S ACCESSION TO NATO:

### WHAT IS BEHIND THE DECISION?

Russia's war against Ukraine has echoed in Northern Europe and in the Arctic, where Russia is one of the most influential actors. The region's security landscape has been significantly transformed after Finland and Sweden, two countries that had previously preferred cooperation with NATO over full membership, joined the Alliance. Because Finland shares a common land border with Russia, its decision was met internationally with reserved understanding. Sweden, however, is in a comparatively unthreatened region, thus for actors outside Northern Europe it was an unexpected move. So, was Stockholm's decision really surprising? Why did it happen, and what are the potential consequences?



*For decades, Sweden has been committed to neutrality. Russia's escalating aggression since 2014 marked a turning point and led to Sweden officially joining NATO. March 18, 2024. Photo: © picture alliance / Xinhua News Agency | Wei Xuechao.*

#### BY OLENA PODVORNA

For decades Sweden has been known as a country committed to a policy of neutrality and non-alignment, a stance dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Neutrality in this context meant non-participation in military alliances and in wars, and thus non-alignment came as a natural outcome. However, perceiving Russia as a powerful threatening actor and itself as comparatively weak, Sweden tried to ensure its security by practicing a pendulum policy, balancing its own interests between those of Russia and Great Britain.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the stance of neutrality was born out a combination of the existing geopolitical landscape,

available resources, and the need to find security amidst rival powers.

Despite the crises of the First World War, the Second World War, and the Cold War, Sweden nonetheless managed to secure its unique position within Northern European international relations. In 2009, in the post-Cold War period, Sweden adopted the unilateral Declaration of Solidarity.<sup>2</sup> According to Swedish officials, the Declaration addressed the changes in Sweden's geopolitical neighbourhood that eliminated the prospect of any military conflict. At the same time, this document projected that Stockholm would not remain passive in the case of any disaster or an attack on the EU member or Nordic country. In the response, Sweden expected a similar reaction from those to whom it promised assistance and protection. However, the declaration was not legally binding. Further, in 2010 Stockholm decided that its army would be all-professional with a focus on peace-keeping operations abroad. The decision was cancelled seven years later, and the conscription was renewed. It should be noted that although Sweden officially announced neutrality and non-alignment, it cooperated with its neighbours and partners – including NATO – during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War period on a number of security and military issues.

#### FROM COOPERATION WITH NATO UP TO NATO MEMBERSHIP

The Balkan wars following Yugoslavia's dissolution, the break-up of the USSR, and the globalization of international relations contributed to the emergence of new military and non-military threats. These changes led to the transformation of the founding docu-



Despite not sharing a border, Russia has direct access to Gotland and the Swedish mainland via the Baltic Sea, PRIF's own compilation, based on [https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num\\_car=5972&lang=de](https://d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=5972&lang=de).

ments of NATO, transforming it into a political-military alliance with a focus on conflicts emerging for reasons other than great power competition. The liberation of the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) due to the collapse of the USSR, and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations, also had an impact on Sweden's understanding of security. In particular, Sweden joined the Partnership for Peace program in 1994, joining NATO in a range of activities, such as preserving nascent democracies, counteracting causes of ethnic or religious conflicts, and providing assistance to NATO Allies abroad upon request and agreement. In this historical context we can see that Sweden's recent decision to change diplomatic course has been forced one.

Russia's sharp escalation of aggression against Ukraine in 2014 marked a turning point for both NATO and Sweden. In the face of Russia's brutal violation of basic principles of international law and the UN Charter, the Alliance was forced to reconsider its perception of Russian behaviour and its own concept of security. This led to gradual changes in official NATO documents and strategic planning. The same changes apply to Sweden, which has had to improve its awareness of the evolving nature of its immediate neighbourhood, especially given that the Baltic countries and Finland, Stockholm's closest partner, felt threatened by Russia's behaviour and its geographical proximity.

While it was obvious that some serious decisions should be taken considering the domestic atmo-

sphere and a previous decision about abolishing conscription, these changes were not immediate, but were cautiously chosen and well thought-out. Sweden has tried to preserve some aspects of its balancing policy in an effort to avoid explicitly provoking Russia. It has taken time to collect data and information, monitor the reaction of other countries and the Alliance, and to take reasonable steps to safeguard the country while staying vigilant for actual and potential threats. The period between 2014 and 2022 can be described as an interim in the transformation of Sweden's security thinking and in the upgrading of its approach to existing challenges. Since 2015, an overall increase in appropriations reached 80%, radically strengthening the capabilities of the Swedish Armed Forces.<sup>3</sup> However, during this period it became clear that Sweden was neither strong enough nor ready for a military conflict on the European continent, leading Stockholm to elaborate a new approach to security. Since then, Stockholm has continued to underline its neutral status and the importance of the Declaration of Solidarity, which, to a certain degree, could be interpreted as a good diplomatic manoeuvre to confuse Moscow.

While the conflict that began in 2014 has not evolved into a full-scale war between Russia and NATO, changes in security understanding and practice have been initiated by the Alliance and Sweden. Stockholm has paid great attention to enhanced cooperation with its closest ally in the region, Finland, which was also not a NATO member and had also previously practiced a balancing strategy towards Russia. Further, Sweden has strengthened its cooperation with the Baltic countries, namely Latvia and Estonia. These two former Soviet republics have the potential to become Russia's next targets, given that President Putin has claimed that the dissolution of the USSR was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> The Kremlin has deployed part of its nuclear capabilities in the Baltic Sea region, and if the Baltic countries were to be attacked, it would open Russia's way towards Finland and Sweden, substantially undermining their security. Having analysed Moscow's techniques of influence against Ukraine, Stockholm defined cyber defence<sup>5</sup> as one of the top priorities in ensuring the security of its Baltic partners. Simultaneously, Sweden has aimed to keep constant contact with Moscow and maintain predictable relations. Stockholm has also tried to raise the level of interoperability with its most important partners, mainly through participation in international operations and exercises. This fact has been seen negatively by Moscow. In addition to training, Sweden, Finland, and NATO have cooperated in joint assessments of the security situation in the Baltic Sea, as this region is of

high importance both to Stockholm and Helsinki. In 2016, the Alliance and Sweden made a step to formalize their relations by signing a Host Nation Support Agreement.<sup>6</sup> This document serves as an indication of the special status of the country-signatory, helping to preserve formal neutrality but simultaneously emphasizing a higher level of cooperation with NATO than is found in partner countries.

While assessing emerging and potential security threats, Stockholm has decided to “raise the conflict deterrence threshold”, by signing more than twenty international agreements on defence and security cooperation.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, these documents could not provide a level of military assistance as could membership in the NATO Alliance, a fact recognized by the Swedish government right after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Russia attacked Ukraine, to which any defence guarantees were extended. A solid need for reliable military protection combined with the belief that the absence of such guarantees serves as an invitation to attack became an explanation for Sweden’s NATO membership application and justification for the abolishment of neutrality and non-alignment.

While in the past full membership in the Alliance was never an option for Sweden, Russia’s guile and brutality came as a significant shock, leading Stockholm to believe that neutrality would no longer offer sufficient protection. In other words, membership in NATO was seen as the best way to protect Sweden against the threat of Russia. The official application letter was submitted on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2022, and full membership became a reality two years later. Accordingly, by becoming a full NATO member, Sweden has acquired a new foreign and security policy identity.

### REDEFINING SWEDEN’S STRATEGY

Sweden’s membership in NATO is the most visible outcome of Russia’s two invasions of Ukraine. However, there have been other consequences that should be highlighted. Firstly, the long-term shift in how Sweden perceives security in its geopolitical neighbourhood. One of the new founding documents of Sweden’s security explicitly notes ‘a structural, long-term and significant deterioration of the security environment’.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, Stockholm recognizes that security developments in its immediate neighbourhood can affect national security and therefore cannot be ignored. Therefore, Stockholm has transformed its security policy in the Baltic Sea region. As noted above, cooperation with Latvia and Estonia intensified before 2022, when Stockholm became interested in handling informal meetings about foreign policy and security developments with the countries of the region (they

are known as NB8 and N5). However, after Russia’s full-scale invasion, Stockholm announced that the Swedish Armed Forces would contribute land forces to Latvia within the scope of NATO’s Forward Land Forces concept to deter a potential Russian attack.<sup>10</sup> This decision was taken prior to obtaining NATO full membership, revealing unequivocally how sensitive and alert Sweden was to Moscow’s prospective intentions and plans. It should be underlined that Sweden’s concerns are more than justified. In May 2024, Moscow announced its plans to unilaterally redraw the border in the Baltic Sea, though later disavowed it.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, Sweden’s perception of Russia has changed. Although official documents avoid labelling Russia as an outright enemy, it is clearly viewed as a significant threat. Stockholm acknowledged that Russia’s recent behaviour (both military attacks against Ukraine and the spectrum of hybrid activities against European countries) aims to devastate the existing security order in Europe and dismantle the European democratic model of statehood. In other words, the Swedish government sees the war against Ukraine as being part of a bigger and more complex picture.

Fourthly, these circumstances influenced Sweden’s decisions regarding relations with Kyiv. In December 2022, Sweden’s Minister for Foreign Affairs, Tobias Billström, declared that war in Ukraine was a major test of the rules-based international system and the set of values and international norms it is based upon. He also warned that if Moscow succeeded in subjugating Ukraine, it would not stop there.<sup>12</sup> The Minister for Defence, Pål Jonson, further reinforced this view in 2024, stating that a Russian victory in Ukraine would represent the greatest threat to Europe and to Sweden’s security,<sup>13</sup> adding that the future of the European security order is inextricably linked to Ukraine’s successes or failures on the battlefield.<sup>14</sup> Sweden has demonstrated consistent and increasing support

## N5 AND NB8

The informal foreign and security cooperation formats of exclusively Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) are called N5. When joined by the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), the acronym NB8 is used. The NB8 and N5 meetings are led either by foreign ministers or prime ministers, who meet (either in person or virtually) several times a year to discuss current issues and coordinate respective policies.

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to Kyiv, given that failure to provide military assistance to Ukraine would undermine its own security. Further, according to the Government Statement on Foreign Affairs, support to Ukraine in the coming years will be Sweden's foremost foreign policy task.<sup>15</sup> To date, the Swedish government has provided Ukraine with seventeen military support packages,<sup>16</sup> and signed a bilateral agreement on security cooperation with Ukraine,<sup>17</sup> underlining that Kyiv has also been fighting for Sweden's freedom.

### WHAT IT BRINGS TO THE FUTURE?

As Russia's war against Ukraine continues, traditional approaches of conflict resolution hardly seem applicable. It is thus very difficult to predict what precise consequences it will have for the European security order in the long run. However, the implications for Sweden's security and foreign policy and for the Alliance are evident. Stockholm has agreed to take on a larger responsibility in ensuring national security and the security of the region, including the Baltic Sea, Northern Europe and the Arctic. By aban-

doning neutrality, strengthening ties with NATO, and supporting Ukraine, Sweden is positioning itself as one of key players in shaping the future of European security. NATO, in its turn, by incorporating Sweden, becomes a proactive Northern player. Stockholm contributes to NATO's expertise on the region by sharing its knowledge, but also territory and corresponding facilities. With every member, the Alliance gets stronger, both politically and military.

### A NEW ROLE FOR NATO?

This Spotlight was written as part of the project "A New Role for NATO in the High North? The European Arctic and Russia's War against Ukraine". The project analyzes security and foreign policy of European Arctic states (Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, Finland) since 2014 to track the change and continuity vis-à-vis Russia as well as NATO. It is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

*PRIF SPOTLIGHT: The Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (PRIF) is the largest institute for peace research in Germany. PRIF sets out to analyze the causes of violent international and internal conflicts, carrying out research into the conditions necessary for peace and working to spread the concept of peace.*

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*References and further reading:*  
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