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Sweden Eyes NATO Security Blanket

By Jan Kallberg

April 14, 2022



Sweden's prime minister and her Finnish counterpart are now strongly hinting that the two countries will join the alliance, and soon. So, what's changed?



The war in Ukraine has challenged the basic assumptions of Swedish geopolitics. Since the late 1940s, Sweden had believed that any war in Europe would be a war between Russia/USSR and NATO. In which case, Sweden could abstain from joining the fight, avoiding the horrors of war, by remaining neutral (unless attacked.)

The doctrine was defined as non-alliance in peace and neutrality in war (in Swedish — *Allianfrihet i fred, neutralitet i krig*.) The third leg was never explicitly stated but understood; if the USSR and Warsaw Pact attacked Sweden, Sweden would immediately drop its neutrality and join the Western alliance, NATO, in its fight.

Embedded in this Swedish line of thought was a fundamental assumption that the threshold of war in Central and Northern Europe was so high that it could only be a major war between the two great power blocs. The threshold would be maintained by the political, economic, and diplomatic consequences of war, and shored up by the military deterrence of the other bloc. Sweden supported the doctrine up to the 1990s with a sizeable army, one of Europe's largest airforces, and a large navy for a country of its size. Its defenses added a significant deterrent against any encroachment on Swedish soil.

Today, in 2022, these Swedish defenses are gone. In the early 1980s, the Swedish army could field 25 brigade combat teams (BCT), while today it could barely scrape together 1–2 brigades, and even these would be an ad hoc constellation of units that lacked training in larger formations. The country's unilateral reduction of its armed forces put even higher weight on the assumption that a land war in Central and Northern Europe would not happen, and the belief that in the remote event that this did happen, Sweden would not initially be involved since it would be a NATO–Russia conflict.

Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine has therefore torpedoed Swedish doctrinal reasoning. Russia is prepared to face sanctions and diplomatic and political repercussions to reach its geopolitical goals. The threshold for conflict was far lower than the Swedes and others assumed.

On February 24, the Russian invasion of Ukraine catapulted Swedish thinking from a naïve belief in everlasting regional stability to the understanding that a Russian attack could directly target Sweden, especially Gotland, which might be seized in a swift attack with the Russians later demanding what they wanted knowing that the

Swedes would be unable to retake the island. As a non-NATO country, Sweden would be left alone to deal with such an attack – and it would fail.

The easiest way to assess the country's need to join NATO is by reversing the point of view from west-to-east to east-to-west. Recent events in Ukraine have reset Nordic geopolitical concerns back to the 1970s, when the USSR Leningrad Military District war planning emphasized capturing Swedish Scania province and Gotland to ensure dominance in the Baltic Sea area. In the 1970s, it was a serious consideration in Swedish defense planning to counter a USSR potential attack; the reach of missiles in those days was limited, so the concern was the Soviet utilization of Gotland as an airbase.

Until the end of the Cold War, Gotland's defense was composed of a mechanized brigade, a coastal artillery brigade, and several independent units after mobilization. In the 1970s and 1980s, the island (about 110 miles by 32 miles) was viewed as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier," an airbase in the middle of the Baltic Sea, for launching air operations and controlling the sea lanes. At that time, in the 1970s, the most advanced anti-ship missiles could attack targets about 30–40 km (19–25 miles) from the firing position. At the same time and age, advanced air defense missiles such as Hawk could engage targets 30 km away.

The majority of the stockpile had far shorter reach, and coastal defense was heavily reliant on coastal artillery with a range of 15 km.

Increased missile ranges have made Gotland pivotal for any fight in the Northern European theater. Viewed by Russian military staff in the Western Military District, the island's importance has only increased. And yet, at the current time, Gotland's defense is a reduced mechanized battalion and a few Swedish territorial defense force companies (Hemvärnet). Given that modern anti-ship missiles can hit warships and shipping over 300 km (186 miles) away, whoever has Gotland can engage warships with anti-ship missiles beyond the Danish island of Bornholm to the southwest, Poland's ports and shores, and control access to the Baltic Sea. If a demonstration was needed, Ukraine's claimed April 14 missile strike on the 11,000-ton Russian cruiser *Moskva*, which set the Black Sea Fleet's flagship ablaze and forced the crew to abandon ship, makes the point very powerfully. Ukraine's Neptune anti-ship missiles are thought to have a range of around 280 km.

Modern anti-aircraft missiles have gone through the same radical development, and Russian S-400 batteries on Gotland, in combination with batteries in Russia, would seal off the Baltic air space. In reality, if Russia were able to use Gotland for its advanced surface-to-air and anti-ship missiles, in combination with batteries in Russia, the NATO defense of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania could create an opportunity in the Russian mindset to retake the Baltics. Gotland would create a Russian perimeter defense against NATO air and naval operations, while the Russians conquered the Baltic states. The NATO concept of rapidly deployed air transported reinforcements would fail.

From a Swedish perspective, the combination of increased missile reach and the Russian willingness to use military force to achieve geopolitical goals, and the diminished Swedish ability to defend itself, add up. Sweden's rearmament will take a decade. Meanwhile, there is a risk that the Swedish territory will be utilized as an operational area by Russia to put pressure on the Baltic states and NATO. Taken together, that probably creates enough momentum for a Swedish NATO membership application.

For decades, Sweden's major political parties have indulged the notion that NATO membership could pull Sweden into an unwanted war. But the war in Ukraine has illustrated that life outside NATO is no safe spot and may be riskier than life inside the alliance.

Sweden has national elections in September, where NATO membership is likely to be a central topic. It may be that the ruling coalition will act before the elections — Swedish popular support for NATO membership has never been higher, especially if Finland joins NATO.

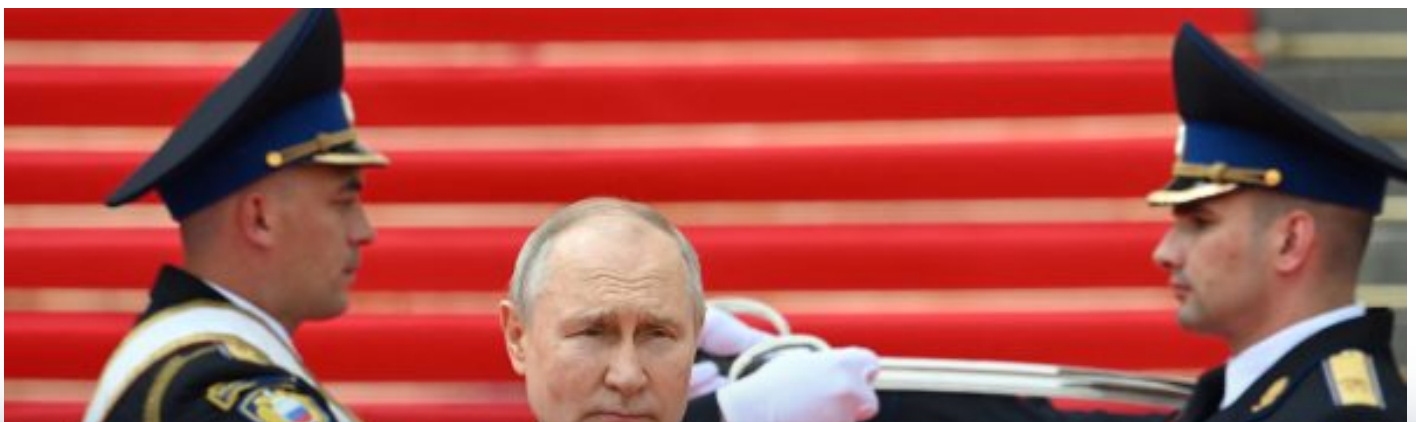
Any Finnish declaration of its intent to join NATO would be swiftly followed by Sweden. The two countries enjoy a shared history of 700 years. Even though each considers that the other has the lousiest hockey team on the planet, a solid cultural and political undercurrent pushes them in the same direction. These cultural mutual dependencies and the sudden loss of geopolitical equilibrium are strong drivers toward NATO membership.

From a Swedish perspective, NATO was for decades the riskier option. That is now reversed — NATO is the safer option.

Jan Kallberg, Ph.D., LL.M., has been focused on cyber for several years. He is a faculty member at New York University and George Washington University. His works have appeared in Joint Forces Quarterly, Strategic Studies Quarterly, IEEE Security & Privacy, and IEEE Access. Follow him at cyberdefense.com and [@Cyberdefensecom](https://twitter.com/Cyberdefensecom).

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Photo: On Wednesday 13 April, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson met with Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin. During the meeting, Andersson and Marin discussed the defense and security policy cooperation between the countries and the deteriorating security policy situation in the immediate area. Credit: Ninni Andersson/Regeringskansliet



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