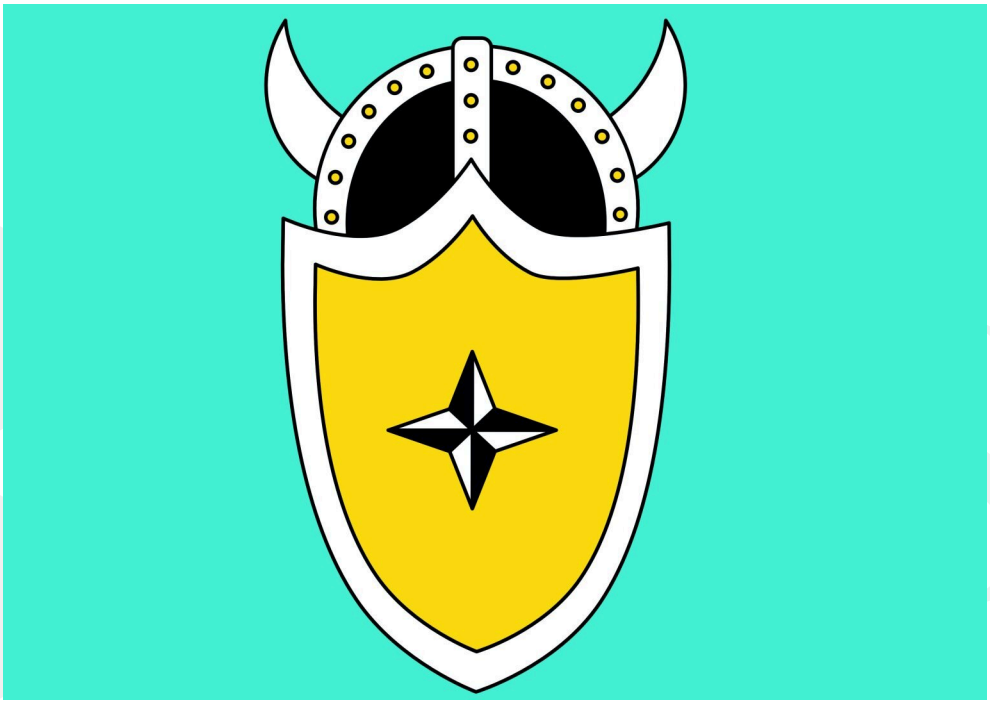
Sweden's Historic Shift

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1. Introduction

On 22 May 2022, Sweden made a historic shift in its security policy by applying for NATO membership. This decision ended 200 years of freedom from military alliances. On March 7, 2024, Sweden was officially admitted as the 32nd member of the defence alliance NATO. This event has great symbolic and practical significance for the country's military and security policy future (BBC, 2024). Sweden's entry into NATO not only represents a shift in the long-standing policy of neutrality and freedom of alliance that has characterised the nation's foreign and security policy stance, but it also entails far-reaching consequences for Försvarsmakten (The Swedish Armed Forces) organisation, strategy, and operational capability. Sweden's membership in NATO means that the Swedish Armed Forces are now facing new and complex challenges such as adapting to the collective defence commitments that the alliance requires and integrating their military struc-

tures and operational capabilities with other NATO countries. But how has the Swedish Armed Forces changed since joining NATO?

2. Swedish Armed Forces in the NATO Era: Their structure and goals

To understand how the Swedish Armed Forces have changed since joining NATO, we first need to review their goals and structure. The ultimate task of the Swedish Armed Forces is to preserve the country's freedom and protect the right to choose how to live. To build a stronger defence, the Swedish Armed Forces train and have exercises often, both within the armed forces and with other authorities and countries. Exercises and operations occur around the clock, all year round – on the ground, in the air, at sea, and online. To be able to face every threat and cope with every challenge. The task of the Armed Forces also includes strengthening and protecting critical societal functions such as the Swedish parliament and being better equipped to cope with crises and natural disasters. The armed forces receive their mandate from the government, which also decides how much money will be allocated to the defence. Across the country, the Swedish Armed Forces has 46 regiments and units and 26.000 active personnel such as officers, soldiers and civilian employees. It also has 34.000 active in the reserve such as the Swedish homeguard, part time soldiers and reserve officers. The mission of the Swedish Armed Forces is largely to defend Sweden with military means and promote the safety of society by:

(Swedish Armed Forces, 2024)

The organisation and structure of the Swedish Armed Forces fall under the authority of the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) and the government. Led by Supreme Commander General Michael Claesson, the Armed Forces are directed and overseen through the Armed Forces Headquarters. With approximately 50,000 active personnel, the Swedish Armed Forces comprise units from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Home Guard. These branches share essential collective resources, including training, logistics, command and control, and intelligence. Regiments, units, and training institutions form the core structure, which is adjusted during times of heightened alert or mobilisation to reassign personnel, equipment, and infrastructure as needed. In peacetime, more than 70 locations across Sweden host the Armed Forces. (Swedish Armed Forces, 2023)

3. Sweden's Strategic Shift: Integrating with NATO and Strengthening the Swedish Armed Forces

These elements will influence NATO's future defence planning, especially concerning the defence of Finland and the Baltic states, as well as providing new strategic opportunities for the defence of Norway. Maintaining control over the Baltic Sea and ensuring the defence of Gotland, while also accommodating large troop movements planned by NATO will be of importance.

Therefore Sweden must ensure its ability to serve as a host nation for NATO operations, involving ground, naval, and air forces. Swedish armed forces may become part of NATO's strategic deterrence capabilities. The ability to plan and lead host nation support, including logistics coordination with NATO, will become increasingly important. Given Sweden's geographic location, the need to improve operational command capabilities is paramount, particularly in the Baltic Sea region, northern Scandinavia, and in leading host nation support. The Swedish Armed Forces aim to establish a unified operational area with other Nordic countries and be part of the same operational command. Currently, Sweden is aligned with NATO's Joint Force Command in Brunssum, the Netherlands, but there may eventually be a shift to NATO's command in Norfolk (Swedish Armed Forces, 2024).

The Swedish cooperation with NATO is however nothing new. Sweden first contributed to a NATO-led operation in 1995 when it sent a battalion to the NATO-led peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since then Sweden has supported the NATO-led forces in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq as well as participating in the enhanced NATO Response Force (NRF) in a supplementary role and subject to national decisions (NATO, 2024). As of recent the Swedish Government has decided to task the Armed Forces with planning and preparing the first Swedish participation in NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence. The Enhanced Forward Presence is a NATO-allied deployed defence and deterrence military force in Northern, Central, and Eastern Europe. This historic contribution will consist of a force equalling the size of a reduced battalion of 600 soldiers and will be sent to Latvia. It will be part of a brigade led by Canada beginning in early 2025 (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024) As Sweden has joined NATO, the country has also officially signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States. This agreement establishes the framework for US forces to continuously operate in Sweden and gives them bigger authority compared to other NATO countries. Key aspects will be covered such as the legal status of US troops, access to deployment zones, and the prepositioning of military equipment within Swedish territory. The agreement marks a significant step in strengthening military cooperation between Sweden and the US. It bolsters regional security, not only for Sweden but also for neighbouring countries, by reinforcing the US's commitment and physical presence in the region. The US has previously established similar DCAs with several European nations, including Norway, Denmark, and Finland (Government Offices of Sweden, 2023), (U.S. Department of State, 2023).

4. Sweden's contribution to NATO: Enhancing Security and Strengthening Europe's Defence Industry

All the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea, except Russia, are now members of the Alliance, reshaping the security dynamics of this part of Europe. The inclusion of Sweden and Finland will expand NATO's operational reach and strengthen the connections between the High North, the North Atlantic, and the Baltic regions. Sweden's strategic location and military assets can significantly enhance the Alliance's ability to conduct operations in Northern Europe. Additionally, Sweden's defence industry will be a major asset for NATO, as it is one of the largest in Europe. The nation's top defence companies produce some of the world's most advanced military technology, including Saab's Jas 39 Gripen fighter jet and BAE Systems AB's Combat Vehicle 90. With ongoing high demand for military equipment, particularly as countries continue supplying arms to Ukraine in response to the Russian aggression, Sweden's defence production capacity will remain crucial in the coming years. Sweden is also home to leading high-tech firms like Ericsson, the world's second-largest network provider; Hexagon, a key software company; and Northvolt, one of Europe's largest lithium battery manufacturers. The country holds significant reserves of critical minerals, such as iron ore and rare earth metals, which are essential for both the defence industry and the green transition (Wilson Center, 2024). Following a recent discovery in Kiruna in northern Sweden, the country now boasts the largest known deposit of rare-earth metals in Europe. This offers NATO a vital opportunity to reduce its reliance on critical minerals from China and other authoritarian regimes (Reuters, 2023).

5. Conclusions

Sweden's entry into NATO represents a historic shift in their security policy, moving from centuries of neutrality to active participation in collective defence. This transition not only affected Sweden's strategic position but also transformed the Swedish Armed Forces in profound ways. Integrating into NATO's defence structures, Sweden now plays a crucial role in regional security, particularly in the Baltic and High North regions, with strategic assets like Gotland and the Öresund Strait becoming vital for NATO operations. The Swedish Armed Forces face new responsibilities, from aligning with NATO's defence planning to enhancing operational command in the Baltic Sea. Sweden's defence industry also stands as a valuable asset, providing cutting-edge technology and critical materials that support NATO's military and technological capabilities. As the country solidifies its role in the alliance, their contributions to regional security, deterrence, and crisis management will continue to grow, ensuring that Sweden and its armed forces not only benefit from the alliance but actively strengthen it.

Visual illustration ideas

A map over northern europe showing Sweden's geographic position in NATO, the map is also showing what countries are NATO countries. The map will highlight the three strategic important areas Sweden has: Gotland, Öresund strait and Gulf of Bothnia. (NATO lake)

All NATO countries including Sweden will have the same NATO blue colour and NATO logo

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