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BRIEF

SWEDEN IN TURBULENT TIMES:

FROM A MULTI-LAYERED SECURITY POLICY TO NATO AND BACK

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Before joining NATO in 2024, Sweden pursued a multi-layered security policy built upon an extensive set of bilateral and multilateral agreements. The so-called Hultqvist doctrine, named after Social Democratic Foreign Minister Peter Hultqvist (2014–22), established a web of cooperation that integrated Sweden into western security structures, while still preserving a certain degree of autonomy by maintaining military non-alignment.[1] Autonomy also served to uphold stability in the Nordic-Baltic region, with Sweden refraining from major changes in security policy patterns.

In 2022, after clear signals from Helsinki and a rapid increase in public support for NATO membership, the Swedish Social Democrats and several other political parties concluded that Sweden had to strengthen its security and do so as a full member of the Alliance. Sweden applied for membership with Finland in May 2022 and was able to join in March 2024, after a rather bumpy accession process. The membership put NATO and the transatlantic link at the centre of Swedish security policy. We are now seeing steps that signal a return to a multi-layered Swedish security policy, though in new forms, amid signs of a weakened transatlantic link and an eroding liberal international order.

NEUTRALITY AND SEARCH FOR AUTONOMY

Although Sweden's path towards NATO membership had been gradual, the decision to apply in May 2022 was a decisive change and the final step into western structures, which at the same time deviated from the autonomous tradition. This tradition developed in the 19th century through repeated declarations of neutrality in response to conflicts. By WWI, Sweden's habit of declaring neutrality had become a policy embedded in its foreign policy identity.[2] It was maintained during the interwar period, WWII, and the Cold War. During the 1950s and 1960s, Sweden's policy of neutrality was gradually reinterpreted, and a new generation of Social Democrats under the leadership of Olof Palme argued that neutrality gave Sweden the opportunity to act as an active critic and mediator.[3]

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Because of its neutrality policy and its desire to secure autonomy, Sweden could be seen as a credible and impartial state, able to make its voice heard without favouring any side. This active involvement in world affairs was combined with Swedish efforts to build a strong national defence and a hidden lifeline through covert cooperation with the US and other western countries, in case its neutrality was not respected.[4] Still, neutrality was the cornerstone of Swedish foreign policy, and it shaped Sweden's identity as a normative

internationalist, perhaps the most internationalist country in the world.[5] This identity persisted after the Cold War ended and after Sweden joined the EU in 1995. Although no longer politically non-aligned, Sweden upheld its tradition of autonomy.[6]

From Autonomy to Integration

The post-neutral identity and the role as a normative internationalist help explain the Hultqvist doctrine, with its web of bilateral agreements, as an alternative to NATO membership before 2022. The rationale behind it was the ability to combine the autonomous role of a normative internationalist with the pursuit of security through different forms of partnership with the EU, NATO, the Nordic-Baltic countries, the US, France, the UK, and many others. In other words, this was a multi-layered approach in which new security challenges were met through new forms of cooperation, but the identity from the era of neutrality still carried weight.

With NATO membership in 2024, this changed. The balancing act formally came to an end, and Sweden became fully integrated into both the EU and NATO. The journey towards western integration, marked by sometimes rather hesitant steps, was now completed, and the desire to maintain an autonomous position was abandoned. As a new member of NATO and as a country that increasingly placed itself at the core of EU foreign and security policy cooperation, Sweden also found it vital to signal its trustworthiness as a fully fledged member of these organisations.

Even after accession, some tension remains between Sweden's post-neutral identity and its more recently acquired position at the core of western security cooperation. Given its long historical trajectory, the post-neutral identity is unlikely to disappear overnight. Another source of tension is the relationship with Washington. From the 2000s onwards, Sweden has invested heavily in its bilateral ties and security cooperation with the US. Under the second Trump administration, it is now evident that American support is becoming less reliable, and the partnership must be seen as more ambiguous. Although this applies to many countries, Sweden's rather drastic shift from a high degree of autonomy to putting many of its eggs in the same American basket has made the relationship with the US a major concern. Hence, there is a tension between the desire to cooperate with the US and the increasing ambiguity on the American side regarding commitments to European security and the liberal international order.

Neutrality shaped Sweden's identity as a normative internationalist

The question is how Sweden can deal with these tensions. So far, it has made an effort to return to a more multi-layered foreign and security policy.

Return of Multi-Layered Strategy

Although the EU and NATO were already central to Swedish policy even before 2022, Stockholm is now trying to situate itself at the core of both organisations.[7] Together, they now constitute the first layer of Sweden's security posture.[8]

A second, increasingly important layer is formed by Nordic, and to a lesser extent Nordic-Baltic, cooperation. It has intensified since Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the Baltic states have also been included to an extent.[9] The Nordic countries have shown growing cohesion, with all of them now NATO members and Denmark abandoning its opt-outs from the EU's common foreign and security policy.[10] This cooperation has also offered Sweden a platform to maintain a certain degree of normative

internationalism, given the rather strong sense of shared political identity among the Nordic countries. The responses to President Trump's demands to take control of Greenland illustrated how Nordic countries came together to defend international law and Greenlandic self-determination. The shared commitment to support Ukraine and to oppose the unlawful Russian invasion is further proof of this. Nordic cooperation has eased the tension between Sweden's post-neutral identity and position at the core of western security cooperation.

Nordic cooperation has eased the tension between Sweden's post-neutral identity and position at the core of western security cooperation

A third layer consists of new forms of security cooperation, with bilateral agreements with France and Poland as recent prominent examples.[11] In the case of France, this includes procuring new frigates for the Swedish navy, as well as discussions about extending French nuclear deterrence to Sweden.[12] In the case of Poland, it covers Polish procurement of Swedish submarines and the launch of the Baltic Sea Pact, which aims to strengthen partnerships within the defence industry and increase Polish-Swedish deterrence capacity. These forms of bilateral cooperation have supported Sweden's efforts to enhance security in the Baltic Sea and along NATO's northern flank, particularly with Finland and Norway. This priority reflects Sweden's changing role in the Arctic, with a stronger focus on becoming a military security provider.[13] Cooperation within the Nordic countries and with other European states has grown in importance as American commitment to European security can no longer be taken for granted. These European initiatives can be seen as a way for Sweden (as well as Europe) to ease the tension between relying on the US and fearing abandonment by it.

In a sense, the multi-layered strategy is a continuation of Sweden's policy before NATO accession, though renewed under changed circumstances in which it should be combined with a desire to take a central role in the Alliance, as well as in the EU. The strategy is not a step back to unilateral autonomy, but rather towards deeper integration to strengthen NATO through Nordic and European efforts. To this end, Sweden should:

- strike a balance between different forms of cooperation. This includes prioritising a leadership role through cooperation that directly depends on Swedish participation. Nordic and broader regional cooperation, involving the Baltic states as well as Poland and Germany, is a prime example.
- combine a role as a core member of the EU and NATO with strong support for Nordic, Nordic-Baltic, and broader Baltic Sea cooperation. Sweden and its partners must show how these forms of engagement contribute to a strong European pillar within NATO.

The multi-layered strategy is a step towards deeper integration

- preserve cohesion among the Nordic countries, strengthening their collective ability to provide security in Northern Europe and uphold international law. Support for Greenlandic and Danish self-determination, and for Ukrainian defence, illustrates shared priorities on which the Nordic countries have acted together to positive effect. These experiences should encourage the Nordic states to maintain unity and avoid fragmentation.[14]

Endnotes

[1] For the use if the concept Hultqvist doctrine, see Wieslander, "The Hultqvist doctrine'—Swedish Security and Defence Policy after the Russian Annexation of Crimea," in *Defence Studies 22*(1) (2022): 35–59. See also Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren, and Anna Michalski, *Sweden's Grand Strategy: Predicaments of a Small Liberal State in a Hostile World* (Oxford University Press, 2025).
[2] See Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren, and Anan Michalski, "Sweden's Policy of Neutrality: The Success of a Flexible Policy?" in *Policy Successes in the Nordic Countries* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 284-305.
[3] For an analysis of Sweden's role as a critic and mediator, see Ulf Bjereld, "Critic or Mediator? Sweden in World Politics, 1945–90," in *Journal of Peace Research 32* (1) (1995): 23–35.
[4] Robert Dalsjö was the first to describe the covert cooperation with NATO partners as a lifeline, a lifeline that was lost in the latter part of the Cold War. See Robert Dalsjö, *Life-Line Lost: The Rise and Fall of "Neutral" Sweden's Secret Reserve Option of Wartime Help from the West* (Santérus Academic Press, 2006).
[5] See Peter Lawler, "Scandinavian exceptionalism and European union," in *Journal of Common Market Studies 35*(4) (1997), 565–594.
[6] Brommesson, Ekengren, and Michalski, *Sweden's Grand Strategy*.
[7] "Så blev Sverige Trumpministrarnas ögonsten i NATO," *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 October 2026.
[8] Ann Michalski, Doulgas Brommesson, and Ann-Marie Ekengren, "The EU as a Security Provider: Changing Foreign Policy Roles Amongst Nordic EU Member States", in *Journal of Common Market Studies 64* (2026): 1453-1472.
[9] Jana Wrange, Rikard Bengtsson, and Douglas Brommesson, "Resilience through total defence: Towards a shared security culture in the Nordic–Baltic region?" in *European Journal of International Security 9*(4) (2024): 511-532.
[10] Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren, and Anna Michalski, "From Variation to Convergence in Turbulent Times—Foreign and Security Policy Choices among the Nordics 2014–2023," in *European Security 33*(1) (2024): 21–43.
[11] See Swedish Government, "Sweden and France intensity defence cooperation," 2026, and Swedish Government, "Joint statement of the Republic of Poland and the Kingdom of Sweden on the Baltic Sea Pact," 2026.
[12] Swedish Government, "Sweden and France held a meeting in the Nuclear Steering Group in Paris," 2026.
[13] Doulgas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren, and Anna Michalski, "The Nordic States and the Arctic: contextually induced role change in a new geopolitical context," in *European Security* (2026): 1-21.
[14] See also Matti Pesu, "Reforming to Preserve: Finland and the Rules-Based International Order," in *ICDS Small States Series* (No 1), August 2026.

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