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History : Sweden's partnership with NATO

Ryan Hendrickson looks at how Sweden has managed to get the best from both neutrality and NATO.

For many of the past 170 years, Sweden has had a policy of "neutrality" in its foreign affairs. Starting with King Karl XIV Johan in the early 19th century, Sweden avoided military engagement in international conflicts. It is no coincidence that the country has not been at war since 1814.

But since the mid 1990s, Sweden has increasingly cooperated with NATO. And it is now developing into a country that can play a significant role as a security provider and vital Partner to the Allies.



Diplomatic Dag: The first Swedish Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld

(© AP / Reporters)

Not so neutral in international diplomacy

In the aftermath of World War II, the official policy from Sweden was one of neutrality. Yet with the creation of the United Nations, it was also clear that Sweden wanted to see democracy advance and the protection of human rights. To help achieve these goals, it put forward skilled diplomats to help shape the international political agenda.

Among Swedish diplomats who played such roles, perhaps most significant during the post World War II era was the "visionary" Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations Secretary General. Hammarskjöld was a founding strategist in calling for the presence of international peacekeepers to help stabilize international political crises, which today is a central component of NATO's post cold war mission.

Other Swedes, including former Prime Minister Olof Palme, and more recently Rolf Ekéus, Hans Blix and Jan Eliasson, have also played significant diplomatic roles in United Nations peace and security missions. These have provided improvements in countries such as Iraq, Mozambique, Namibia, Somalia and Sudan. Even today, Sweden's foreign minister, Carl Bildt, is notable for his earlier role in encouraging peace and reconciliation in the Balkans.

Now Sweden is increasingly starting to use its military, often in concert with NATO, to build upon its diplomatic skills

Using skilled diplomats in international mediation is almost a Scandinavian trait. For example, Norway's diplomats also play a lead role in international diplomacy, such as in the Israeli-Palestinian 'Oslo accords'.

Norway, as a member of NATO clearly combines this diplomacy with its military alliances. But now, Sweden is

increasingly starting to use its military, often in concert with NATO, to build upon its diplomatic skills too.

Sweden's evolution with NATO

Although officially neutral during the Cold War, historical analyses published by the Swedish government in the 1990s highlighted Sweden's close ties with several NATO Allies. Almost from NATO's creation, Swedish officials felt that, if attacked, a de facto security guarantee was in place from some of the Allies. So, in this respect, Sweden was anything but neutral. And it has a long history of working quietly with NATO Allies on joint security issues.

Despite these agreements Sweden knew it could not neglect its own defence and military needs. It understood the need for a professional and modern military, capable of defending the country. Today, Sweden's long-term military modernization and defence spending has created a professional, well equipped force.

This includes modern transport and combat aircraft, as well as 15 military units that are prepared to engage in international operations. And its continued investment in ensuring that its JAS 39 Gripen aircraft are interoperable with NATO air forces makes Sweden an increasingly compatible Partner state.

So both NATO and Sweden saw the potential benefits when NATO announced the creation of its Partnership for Peace (PfP) plan in 1994. Sweden almost immediately became an official "Partner" with the Allies.

The PfP agreement gives Sweden an extensive relationship with the Allies, including activities such as joint training operations in international rescue management and participation in NATO's mine clearing programmes in Albania and Serbia. In 1997, Sweden also became a member of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC).

Today, Sweden is one of the Allies' most visible supporters among NATO's many partnering countries. In September this year, for example, Sweden posted 260 troops as the lead country for NATO's Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan. It also has some 300 troops in NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR).

Swedish troops are not limited to NATO operations. There are still 240 Swedish peacekeepers in the United Nations mission in Liberia, as well as about 70 troops in the European Union (EU) mission in Bosnia.



Sweden backs up its diplomatic work with boots on the ground (© Rickard Wissman/Combat Camera/Swedish Defence Force)

Sweden's missions - far and fast

Crucially, Sweden has also shown that its Armed Forces are deployable at short notice. In 2003, it was one of the lead states to place Special Forces in the EU mission in Bunia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which helped avert a wider humanitarian crisis.

Sweden is reforming its Armed Forces to become even more deployable and professional, mirroring NATO's calls for military transformation. This aim was reflected in its 2004 and 2005 Defence Resolutions.

Its transition is best illustrated in its commitment to create the Nordic Battlegroup, a multilateral military framework including Estonia, Finland and Norway, by 2008. The group will support the European Union's efforts to form its own rapid reaction forces.

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Similarly, Sweden has remained active in training missions for the newly created NATO Response Force. And, over the last decade, it has cooperated extensively with NATO's Baltic Allies, assisting them in their force and defence transformations, while also enhancing its joint air and sea surveillance activities with NATO neighbour Norway.

However, for all these advances, there remains one area of serious concern -Sweden's decreasing percentage of military spending since 2001. By 2005, Sweden's percentage of gross domestic product devoted to military expenditures was only 1.5 percent. While much of its defence budget was devoted to research and development as well as weapons acquisitions, this steady descent will limit its more ambitious military modernization goals. This played a role in the resignation of Defence Minister Mikael Odenberg earlier this year.

Lessons learned

What lessons can we draw from the Sweden-NATO relationship?

First, that NATO has found ways to integrate non-aligned countries and new Partners into the Alliance in significant ways.

Second, although Sweden remains "militarily non-aligned," it is clear that it is anything but neutral when it comes to NATO. Its activities in Afghanistan, Kosovo, in NATO training operations and in force modernization mean Sweden has both the political will and the military capabilities to be a real "security provider" for the Allies.

Finally, Sweden's leadership roles in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan and KFOR indicate that Sweden is helping shape international political agendas through military, as well as the traditional diplomatic, means.

The Nordic Battlegroup is in many ways an excellent example of Swedish foreign and security policy. It entails multilateral cooperation, defence modernization, joint efforts with two of NATO's Allies, but still a degree of independence from the European Union and NATO.

Commitment, but not membership

Sweden understands that modern security threats need multilateral cooperation and an active military presence abroad; being "neutral" to terrorism and massive violations of human rights is an untenable policy. At the same time, while most Swedes support these policy changes, there is much less support for official membership in NATO.

In some respects, Sweden's long-standing relationship with NATO is unique. But in other ways, the relationship demonstrates that - even if domestic audiences do not yet fully support Alliance membership - there are ways in which EAPC and PfP members can make important contributions to the Allies' security objectives.

As Sweden has demonstrated many times, full membership in NATO is not always a necessity for countries wanting to play a meaningful role in the world's evolving security environment.