Sweden: A "Functional Member" of NATO?
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Copenhagen September 2019

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Editor in Chief: Steen Wegener, Head of Institute for Military Operations
Internal peer review
Layout: Royal Danish Defence College
ISBN: 978-87-7147-265-3
“Partner number one”, “NATO’s special partner,” “gold card holder”. A wide range of nicknames have been used over the past 25 years to define Sweden’s relationship with NATO, ever since the non-aligned country first entered into a formal partnership with the Alliance. Before that time and during the Cold War, the then officially neutral country was often jokingly referred to at NATO HQ as its secret “17th member” – at a time when the membership of the Alliance counted sixteen countries.¹

Today, expressions like “allied partner”, “semi-allied”, or even “functional member” can be heard in the corridors at NATO HQ as ways to describe Sweden’s current relationship with the Alliance.² The question is what exactly it means for Sweden to be a “functional member”, and is it indeed an accurate way to describe the role of the Nordic partner in transatlantic security?

From the 17th Member to Gold Card Holder
After decades of top secret cooperation with NATO, primarily pursued through bilateral contacts with its Nordic neighbours, Denmark and Norway, and other close allied friends such as Great Britain and the US – which gave the country a non-official status as a “17th member” – Sweden stepped up its relationship with NATO and brought it out into the open shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. When the brand new Partnership for Peace (PfP) was introduced by NATO in 1994, Sweden was among the first to join, simultaneously with equally non-aligned Finland. This step marked the definite end to the policies of double doctrines – official neutrality coupled with unofficial NATO cooperation – that had characterised Sweden’s security and military policies since the early 1950s.³

Contrary to the clear majority of the countries that lined up to become part of the PfP, Sweden (and Finland) did, however, not see this as a first step towards NATO membership.⁴ Instead, partnership with NATO was one - albeit one immensely significant - component of a general move towards the West after all those Cold War years in an officially neutral, third way position among the superpowers. Swedish membership of the European Union in 1995 - simultaneously with Finland - was another key factor in this political reorientation. As a result of the EU membership, “neutrality” once and for all disappeared from the vocabulary and was replaced by “non-alignment” as the correct definition of the present Swedish security doctrine.

¹) Sweden as NATO’s top secret “17th member” is most recently discussed in Dahl 2018b and Dahl 2014, pp 83ff.
³) For Sweden’s relations with NATO during the Cold War, see Holmström 2011, Dahl 2014, and Dahl 2018b.
The partnership was also of great value from the perspective of military interoperability. Right from the start Sweden moved to adjust to NATO standards (to the extent this was doable for a country with a substantial defence industry of its own). As a partner country, Sweden — having a long tradition as a UN peacekeeper — quickly signed up to participate in NATO-led operations, starting with the Balkans in the 1990s. The country has since been part of all major NATO operations, including ISAF, with a Swedish contingent in the Northern Afghanistan province of Mazar-el-Sharif. Today, Sweden maintains a presence in Afghanistan of around 30 personnel and has pledged to increase the numbers.5

Operation Unified Protector (OUP) in Libya in 2011 is of particular interest in this regard. Sweden was one of only three partner countries — the others being Qatar and the United Arab Emirates — to participate in the Libyan operation, with a contribution by its air force that was both highly effective and highly appreciated by NATO.6 Though it did not drop any bombs — an activity which was seen in Stockholm as much too provocative for the non-aligned country — the Swedish deployment of the JAS 39 Gripen fighter aircraft is nevertheless estimated to have had a greater operational impact than that of several of the actual allies. Thus, Sweden provided a total of 37% of all the surveillance reporting to the OUP. The Swedish performance in the OUP earned the country yet another nickname as NATO’s “partner number one”. An equally impressive Swedish presence in the CMX in October that year, where the partner country surprised everyone present by offering Article 5 support to NATO, led to intense speculations about a forthcoming application for membership from Stockholm.7

With the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014 and the illegal annexation of Crimea, the Baltic Sea region made an abrupt comeback as a strategic frontline, at the same time exposing the vulnerable position of non-aligned Sweden after decades of severe cuts in the military.8 Sweden had been a witness to Russian aggression even before Ukraine made headline news in the spring of 2014, with a series of military provocations aimed at the country from Moscow. The incident on Easter Friday in 2013, when Russian TU-22 pilots simulated nuclear bombing attacks on Swedish territory — with Danish F-16s coming to the rescue from the Lithuanian base of Siauliai — was particularly shocking for the Swedes and highly embarrassing for the country’s military.9

The events in Ukraine in the spring of 2014 were a wake-up call for the non-aligned partner in yet another way. After all those years out of area in Afghanistan, where

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5) Interviews at the Swedish MOD, spring and summer 2019.
6) For an analysis of the Swedish performance in the OUP, see Dahl 2012, pp 2 ff.
8) For an extensive analysis of Baltic Sea security, see the collection of chapters by regional experts in Dahl 2018a.
9) These and other examples of Russian provocations are discussed in Dahl 2016b.
the distinction between partners and allies often seemed like a mere formality, NATO’s return to collective defence and Article 5 as a result of Russia’s aggression abruptly tore Sweden and other partners out of the privileged relationship Sweden had enjoyed for years in ISAF. With NATO’s U-turn back to collective defence, it was as if a door with a “members only” sign was suddenly closed right in front of the astounded partners.\(^{10}\)

However, as the security situation rapidly deteriorated in the Baltic Sea, the need to involve the two Nordic partner countries soon became obvious at NATO HQ.\(^{11}\) The new format, known as the Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP), that was unveiled at the Wales Summit in September 2014 granted NATO’s five top operational partners – which apart from Sweden and Finland include Australia, Jordan and Georgia – an even closer relationship with the Alliance, with improved mechanisms for political dialogue and deepened military cooperation. The geographic spread of these five partners in diverse corners of the world is a reflection of the global distribution of security challenges that confront the Western world today, from the Asian-Pacific region to the Baltic Sea.\(^{12}\)

Further content was added to the EOP by a series of proposals on intelligence sharing, strategic communication, enhanced situational awareness and military-to-military cooperation put forward by Denmark in 2015 in a friendly effort to help its Nordic neighbours.\(^{13}\)

As a flexible and pragmatic instrument which is individualised and tailor-made to fit the security concerns of each and every one of the five partners, the EOP has often been referred to as a “gold card”, a term originally introduced by the Swedes during the negotiations.\(^{14}\) Similar to frequent flyer programmes, the EOP rewards its “card holders” for their contributions and grants them special privileges – but, in the same way as with gold cards handed out by the airlines – the enhanced partnership can be discontinued if a participant does not meet NATO’s expectations and requirements.

By late 2017, the EOP was extended through 2021. In the Swedish case it was, however, not without complications. The Swedish vote in favour of the UN Nuclear Ban Treaty in 2017 received widespread criticism – in the domestic debate, but more significantly from Secretary General Stoltenberg and key allies, such as the then US Secretary of Defense James Mattis.\(^{15}\) It was long unclear whether the Swedish government would indeed sign the treaty in spite of the strong

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13) Dahl 2016a, p 44.
14) Interviews, 2015. Järvenpää 2016 provides a detailed presentation of the EOP.
recommendations offered by experts and allies alike against such a step. In the summer of 2019, it was finally announced that the UN treaty would not be signed by the Löfven-government after all.

**Exercises, exercises, exercises**

Apart from sizeable Swedish delegations in Mons and in the Manfred Wörner Building in the old HQ in Brussels, Swedish representatives can be found in various other parts of the NATO system. This includes NATO commands in Northern Europe, such as the Joint Forces Command Brunssum in the Netherlands and the Multinational Corps North East (MNC NE) in Stettin, Poland. Swedish military personnel also took part in the Danish-led Standing NATO Maritime Group I (SNMGI) during the Joint Warrior exercise in the spring of 2018. As a matter of fact, the substantial Swedish contributions to NATO-led exercises may be a major reason for the perception of the partner country as a “functional member” of NATO.

In the last five years - since the Russian aggression in Ukraine - the number of exercises in the neighbourhood of Sweden have skyrocketed, in the Baltic Sea as well as in the High North. Some of these exercises to which Sweden has made substantial contributions are annual or biannual events, such as the Arctic Challenge, the latest of which took place during a couple of weeks in May-June 2019. Arctic Challenge 19 (ACE19) was for the fourth time co-hosted by the air forces of Sweden, Norway and Finland and this time led by the Swedes. As one of the largest European air power exercises, ACE19 was conducted by more than 100 aircraft from nine participating nations, including Denmark, and supported by NATO-operated AWACS. It was carried out in the skies over the northernmost parts of the three countries, where the host countries perform Cross Border Training on an almost weekly basis all year round.

ACE19 was concluded just days prior to the huge BALTOP 19 exercise in the southern parts of the Baltic Sea, with a simulated invasion of the Southern province of Skåne as a spectacular part of the exercise. BALTOP is the largest exercise in the Baltic Sea and is carried out annually. This year it was run by the US Navy’s 2nd Fleet from Norfolk, VA, and involved around 8,600 US and European troops – maritime, air and ground forces – from 18 countries. In addition, it was one of the first training opportunities for the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) led by the UK, with a Swedish contribution of two “Visby class” corvettes.

18) www.forsvarsmakten.se/ace19/
Many other training events and exercises can be added to the long list. One exercise seems, however, to have been key for the perception of Sweden as a “functional member” or a partner that is in reality “semi-allied”. Trident Juncture 2018 was the largest exercise conducted by NATO since the end of the Cold War, with a grand total of 50,000 troops and with an entire US air division stationed at the Swedish air base Kallax in the very north of the country. The sizeable American contribution to the exercise included the carrier Harry S. Truman which was anchored off the coast of northern Norway. The large-scale Article 5 exercise involved all 29 allies plus Sweden and Finland. It was particularly valuable to the Swedes by preparing the partner country’s air and naval forces for their future participation in NATO’s rapid reaction force, the NRF. National news coverage showed NATO troops and vehicles making their way across Sweden en route to their destinations in neighbouring Norway, an truly unique sight in the non-aligned country, but a practical manifestation of the Host Nation Support agreement signed with NATO in 2014 and entering into effect two years later, after a heated domestic debate.

A “functional member”? Indeed, in many ways Sweden – NATO’s top enhanced partner and “gold card holder” – does seem to meet the presumed requirements of a “functional member”, i.e. to function as a member. As an operational partner and reliable security provider – perhaps most convincingly proven in the Libya operation in 2011 – in some instances, it has delivered a great deal more security than several of the currently 29 actual members of the Alliance. In the Nordic-Baltic region, its performance in NATO exercises has on several occasions impressed observers and allies alike.

On the other hand, it is also universally agreed within the Alliance that the fact that two of the strategically most important countries surrounding the Baltic Sea remain non-aligned does complicate security in the region and the implementation of reassurance and deterrence measures, in particular in the case of Sweden because of its limited military strength. Without access to NATO secrets, there is also a definite limit to the operational role that Sweden, or for that matter Finland, can play as well as to the level of confidentiality with which it can – or should - be treated by the allies.

Conversely, as an outsider and a non-member Sweden suffers from not having a vote in the North Atlantic Council, though it is occasionally granted a voice jointly with Finland when NAC convenes in a 29 + 2 format. With a seat at the table,

23) Dahl 2018a, p 3.
the fact that the country still – after recent rounds of investments – maintains the lowest level of defence expenditures in the region, with no realistic way to reach the 2 % goal agreed upon at the Wales Summit, would not be looked upon favourably by some of the others in the room. Most crucially for Sweden, considering its vulnerable position, as a partner country only it does not enjoy the protection of the security guarantees in Article 5.

As a matter of fact, in spite of the great value ascribed by the country to its position as an enhanced partner, the bottom line which defines the current Swedish security and defence policies could be expressed as “anything but NATO membership”. In addition to the far-reaching Swedish-Finnish cooperation – even extending “beyond peacetime” – a great number of bilateral defence agreements have been signed with Sweden’s allied friends and neighbours, including Denmark, Norway, Poland, Germany, the UK and the US. Known as “the Hultqvist Doctrine” after the architect of this policy, Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist, the present reliance on bilateral cooperation is actually reminiscent of the non-official NATO contracts pursued by Swedish governments during the Cold War.

These bilateral defence agreements are complemented by an equally strong emphasis on regional and multilateral formats such as NORDEFCO and the Northern Group. In addition, in the summer of 2019 Stockholm announced that it was willing and ready to join Denmark and others in the European Intervention Initiative (EII) organised by France.24

Rather than “semi-allied”, an “allied partner” or a “functional member”, Sweden is one of five partners at the very top and a “special” partner to NATO - but still only a partner. Unfortunately, it is likely to remain in that vulnerable position for the foreseeable future.

**Literature**


Ann-Sofie Dahl (ed.), *Baltic Sea security: How can allies and partners meet the new challenges in the region?* (Copenhagen: Centre for Military Studies, 2016a).


