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Sweden: reinventing total defence and a proactive stance in NATO

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On 17 December, the Swedish parliament adopted the country's defence resolution for 2025–2030. This is the first document to outline the primary directions for military cooperation and the development of Sweden's defence capabilities in both military and civilian spheres following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Sweden's accession to NATO. Stockholm identifies Russia, supported by other revisionist authoritarian states, as the principal threat. Sweden's key allies include the United States and Nordic-Baltic countries.

The strategy finalises a decade-long shift in Sweden's security policy focus from global challenges and crisis management operations to defence and deterrence in Northern Europe. It also marks a new phase in rebuilding the country's defence capabilities following the planning cycles for 2016–2020 and 2021–2025. By 2030, Sweden will focus on prioritising investments in land forces and civil defence. The resolution includes a 50% increase in defence spending, raising it to 2.6% of GDP for military purposes by 2030.

A strategy for turbulent times

The *Försvarsbeslutet* legislation for 2025–2030 (the defence resolution), prepared by Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson's centre-right government and unanimously adopted, serves as Sweden's de facto defence strategy. The 174-page document analyses the security environment, outlines priorities for security and defence policies within NATO and the EU, identifies key allies for closer military cooperation, and sets out plans for total defence – encompassing the comprehensive development of the country's military capabilities and civil defence.

Sweden regards the international environment as increasingly unstable and unpredictable, shaped by a conflict between democratic states and autocracies, with the latter seeking to establish spheres of influence. From Stockholm's perspective, Russia's shift towards totalitarianism positions it as the most destructive actor in its immediate neighbourhood, particularly due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Russia is seen not only as a present threat but also as a long-term one, due to the ongoing militarisation of its society and economy. Sweden maintains that, despite the attrition of the Russian land forces in Ukraine, Kremlin continues to possess offensive capabilities in the Nordic-Baltic region, particularly in the maritime and air domains, as well as through the deployment of special forces. Stockholm also remains concerned about the expansion of Russia's nuclear arsenal. The document extensively discusses the growing Sino-Russian cooperation and Beijing's enablement of the invasion of Ukraine, as well as direct threats posed by China to Sweden,

including cyberattacks, intelligence operations, and espionage activities.

A major challenge highlighted in the strategy is the global shift in the centre of gravity from the Euro-Atlantic area to Asia, alongside the relative decline of US power. From Stockholm's perspective, Europe's future will increasingly hinge on the dynamics of relations between Russia, China, and the United States, with particular emphasis on Beijing-Washington relations. Sweden views the US as the primary guarantor of European security. However, Stockholm recognises risks related to shifting priorities of the US security policy (resulting from electoral cycles), Washington's growing focus on the Indo-Pacific, and the generational change in the US politics coupled with demographic trends that could weaken transatlantic ties. Consequently, Stockholm stresses the urgency of rapidly increasing defence investments within Europe.

Sweden considers providing extensive military aid to Kyiv and holding back Russia in Ukraine as the best investment in its own security. It declares full support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, in line with the bilateral security cooperation agreement signed in May 2024.

The parameters of the security and defence policy

Sweden defines its role in NATO primarily as a 'security provider' within the region, aiming to make a visible contribution to allied deterrence and defence through a two-pronged approach. On one hand, its priorities include participation in Baltic Sea air policing, NATO's standing naval forces, and the multinational Forward Land Forces (FLF) on the northeastern flank. This will involve deploying a mechanised battalion of 600 troops to Latvia from 2025. In the future, a flagship project will be the deployment of larger forces within the planned FLF in northern Finland as the framework nation. On the other hand, Sweden plans to complement this forward defence by investing in HNS capabilities to receive and support allied forces across its territory, stretching from the Baltic to the Arctic. Sweden envisions itself as a logistical and operational hub for the defence of Norway, Finland, and the Baltic states. Additionally, Stockholm will contribute its capabilities and expertise in winter warfare and Baltic Sea naval operations.

Sweden aims to prioritise military cooperation with Finland and Norway while advocating for putting all Nordic countries under one operational command within NATO (US-based JFC Norfolk) as part of a regional defence plan for Northern Europe. Stockholm also seeks to enhance regional defence cooperation with the Baltic states, Germany, and Poland in addition to its well-developed defence relationships with the Nordic states. The strategy highlights Poland's growing importance given its proximity to Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, as well as Warsaw's pivotal role in logistics for aid deliveries to Kyiv. On 28 November, Sweden and Poland signed a new bilateral strategic partnership focused on security and defence cooperation, including protecting EU's external borders, combating hybrid threats, and safeguarding critical infrastructure. As regards other European allies, the strategy emphasises the role played by the United Kingdom as a leader of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the Northern Group, which brings together the defence ministers of the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, as well as the Nordic and Baltic states. France is also mentioned as one of the key European allies. The United States remains a critical military partner, with which Sweden seeks full interoperability and full implementation of the bilateral 2023 Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA). From Stockholm's perspective, the

EU serves a complementary role to NATO in matters of security policy. Sweden acknowledges that, during the war in Ukraine, the EU has demonstrated ability to provide various forms of support (including military) to its partners and impose sanctions on aggressors. The Swedish government aims to actively shape the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), with a focus on military mobility, joint capability development programmes, and defence industry cooperation. Sweden has announced its participation in the German-led EU battlegroup, which will contribute to the EU's Rapid Deployment Capacity in 2025.

Prospects for military buildup and investments in civil defence

The recently adopted strategy plans to increase military spending from over SEK 122 billion ($11.2 billion, 2.2% of GDP) in 2024 to SEK 186 billion in 2030. This rise in defence investment addresses the need to expand and enhance the capabilities of Sweden's armed forces. In recent years, increased ambitions for military expansion were not reflected in spending, which stayed at around 1% of GDP until 2020 and rose to just 1.4–1.6% between 2021 and 2023.

To rebuild a trained mobilisation reserve, Stockholm intends to expand the selective conscription system reinstated in 2017. By 2035, the wartime strength of the armed forces is projected to reach 130,000 troops, up from the current 88,000. The number of conscripts trained annually is set to rise from approximately 7,000 in 2023 to 10,000 by 2030 and 12,000 by 2035, according to the document. However, this marks a scaled-back ambition compared to earlier plans, which aimed to train 14,000 conscripts annually.

Regarding the land forces, primary focus will be placed on equipment procurement and further developing units established under the 2015 and 2020 strategies. These included plans for a third mechanised brigade, a reduced infantry brigade with wheeled APCs, and five additional motorised battalions. The reduced infantry brigade will now be upgraded to a full brigade, and a new rocket artillery regiment with two battalions of launchers, likely HIMARS, will be established. The strategy also reaffirms the intention to create a division-level command by 2030 and to expand ground-based air defences, though it does not provide details. The five new motorised battalions will be assigned to two of the three mechanised brigades, the infantry brigade, and the battlegroup stationed on Gotland, with one battalion remaining independent. The two mechanised brigades will be prepared for sub-Arctic operations and are expected to reach full combat readiness by 2028. To equip these units, Sweden will need to double its armoured assets, which currently consist of 110 Leopard 2 tanks and 288 CV90 IFVs, and procure approximately 36 multiple rocket launchers.

As regards the navy and the air force, Stockholm intends to continue previously initiated modernisation programmes. The only new procurement will consist of coastal anti-ship missiles (RBS15 Mk3) intended for the two existing marine regiments. By the end of the decade, the modernisation of Visby-class corvettes (equipped with CAMM air defence systems) is expected to conclude, and the construction of five new Luleå-class corvettes will commence. The air force will proceed with the introduction of JAS 39E Gripen fighters, GlobalEye early warning & control aircraft, and Black Hawk helicopters. Additionally, it will oversee the integration of Swedish capabilities into NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) system.

Sweden also intends to invest further in civil defence, which was reintroduced in a previous defence strategy. An additional SEK 37.5 billion ($3.44 billion) from the Ministry of Defence's budget is set to be allocated for this purpose by the end of the decade. The funds will primarily be earmarked for the support and coordination of the crisis management system to ensure uninterrupted wartime operations of power plants, postal services, food and water supplies, healthcare, social services, transport, and law enforcement. Additional legislation will outline requirements for companies to support society and the state during crises and war. The strategy also seeks to strengthen capabilities in cyberspace and cognitive defence (psychological operations). Due to budgetary constraints, the government does not intend to build shelters for the civilian population. Instead, legislation will be introduced to enable their construction by local governments and citizens.