

Sweden in NATO: Prepared from day one
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Sweden and its neighbor Finland have submitted membership applications to NATO. Time and again, news accounts of Sweden's application have characterized this decision as a sea-change in the country's strategic posture. Once it becomes a member of the alliance, it will have put aside, it is said, its non-aligned status and nearly two centuries of neutrality when it comes to regional and global conflicts.

Critics of the country's admittance will argue that this Johnny-come-lately effort will add yet another member unprepared to contribute to NATO's core defense responsibilities. Yet the reality is, Sweden might well be the most prepared new member since the end of the Cold War.

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, Swedish governments, with a broad cross-party consensus, have been increasing military capabilities and reviving the country's civil defense preparations.

Although admittedly starting from a low level, the defense budget has gone up every year since 2015 and will have increased by 95 percent by 2025. In addition, the government has now pledged to meet the NATO goal of spending at least 2 percent of a member's GDP on defense. How fast that happens will depend on how quickly it can expand its forces and acquire new equipment.

In the meantime, Sweden is expanding its active-duty force and its "home guard" from around 55,000 to 90,000. New capabilities include plans for new submarines, new fighter jets, new cyber capabilities, a new mechanized brigade, Patriot air defenses, new fast patrol boats, upgraded tanks, offensive mine-laying capabilities, new division-level command structure and reinforced defenses for the strategically important Baltic Sea island of Gotland.

To top things off, conscription, which had ended after a century in 2010, was reintroduced in a modified form in 2018.

The Swedes are realistic about the size of the country they must defend and the limits of what it can field to fend off a major conventional attack. While Russia might not be as formidable a military power as we in the West thought, it still presents a significant conventional threat to Sweden. The country cannot assume that it will be able to repel an invasion.

As a result, Sweden is reviving a civil defense structure from the Cold War that will attempt to hold out for several months of a conflict, until help arrives from neighbors and allies.

This new “Total Defense” includes expanded training and equipment for the Home Guard forces, stockpiling necessary supplies for both the military and the civilian population, provisions for handling mass casualties, shelters and bunkers, updated continuity of government plans, and resilient communications for both the government and the public. It’s back to the future for Sweden when it comes to civil defense.

But what is relatively new, and little understood by many, is that Sweden’s security ties to America and its European allies have grown exponentially in recent years. To start, Sweden ended its policy of neutrality when it joined the European Union (EU) in 1995 and then ratified the Lisbon Treaty in 2008, which, under Article 42.7, obligates a member state to assist fellow members against armed aggression. And, as an element of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy, Sweden has, since 2008, led the Nordic Battle-group.

And even before becoming an EU member, Sweden joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace program in 1994 and is one of a handful of countries in the alliance’s Enhanced Opportunities program intended to increase military interoperability.

In addition to having signed defense cooperation agreements with the U.S., Poland, Finland and Denmark in recent years, Stockholm offered Swedish military personnel for NATO’s Response Force and forces for Afghanistan.

t also signed an agreement with the alliance to provide logistical support for NATO exercises on Swedish soil — which, in time of an actual conflict, would make receiving support from allied militaries easier.

Sweden also participates in the NATO-run strategic airlift consortium, NATO’s Cyber Defence Centre and is regularly involved in NATO-sponsored exercises involving air, land, sea and cyber forces.

Is Sweden a military powerhouse? No. But it has increasingly become a serious military, headed in the right direction with its reforms and capable of working with the United States and our allies from the day it becomes a member. Given its own close working ties with Finland, the addition of the two countries to NATO’s roster is a net strategic gain. It will immediately bolster both the alliance’s High North and the

Baltic region's capabilities — adding a needed level of deterrence to an area short of it.