

Will the war in Ukraine push Sweden to join NATO?

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted speculation that Sweden could abandon its historic commitment to neutrality and join NATO. Greg Simons writes that while there is strong support for NATO membership among mainstream Swedish politicians, the public is deeply divided over the issue and full membership remains unlikely in the short term.

The open eruption of the Ukraine crisis into the Russia-Ukraine War has caught many observers off guard, although there have been [various clues](#) pointing to this eventual tragic and catastrophic outcome. There are also various potential political and geopolitical repercussions that stem from this war for other countries in Europe in terms of foreign and security policy debates and reactions to the war.

Among these countries is Sweden, a country that has had a rather long and complicated relationship with Russia over the centuries, which has affected its foreign and security policy identity and stance. Will this latest war in Europe affect Sweden's official position in terms of its adherence to the neutral/non-aligned identity?

Sweden's complex relationship with Russia

Before beginning on the contemporary rhetoric and debate on Sweden's foreign policy and the NATO debate, it is necessary to understand a complicated historical background that has given context and shapes the present. Several centuries ago, in spite of its population and the size of its economy, Sweden was a significant regional power in the Baltic Sea region. [Sweden's armies](#) were involved in numerous European wars in what is now Germany, Poland, the Baltic States and Russia/Ukraine.

Russia's power gradually grew and clashes between the Swedish and Russian empires gradually wore down Swedish power and dismembered the Swedish Empire via catastrophic losses, such as in the [Battle of Poltava](#) (Ukraine) in 1709 and the loss of Finland in [1809](#). Sweden [reacted](#) to these significant military setbacks by [becoming nominally neutral](#), although this policy has been very much stretched to the limits at times, such as during the Second World War.

Although nominally neutral, Sweden has practiced something closer to non-alignment, with neutrality during times of peace and non-alignment during times of war. This can be viewed as something of an [apparent paradox](#) of Swedish foreign and security policy. In the 21st century there has been a gradual and noticeable shift in this respect. Sweden has had a rather high regard for itself as an international actor and has cultivated the role of a superior global citizen that should be emulated by others – the so-called '[Swedish Model](#)'.

Sweden's 21st century foreign policy identity has been wrapped around core brand elements, such as a [feminist foreign policy](#) or its status as a [humanitarian superpower](#). Yet there are obvious contradictions to these value signalling messages, such as Sweden's [arms industry](#). Sweden, on the one hand has considered itself to be a [value innovator](#) and a role model – traits that have a tendency to be accompanied by a rather didactic approach and posture in lecturing others. However, Sweden has been gradually assimilating its foreign policy platform to align with the values and norms of the Euro-Atlantic structures and global liberalism. This has had an effect on the attitude and goals of mainstream Swedish political actors in relation to how they view and interact with NATO.

The NATO debate

There has been a gradual decline in relations between Sweden and Russia since at least 2008, which has been used as a basis for [lobbying public opinion](#) in Sweden to become more favourably predisposed towards NATO membership. [Highly mediatised events](#), such as the 2008 Georgian-Russian War, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and the 'Russian submarine' in the Stockholm Archipelago (and in Helsinki Harbour at the same time) all served to slightly increase public support for NATO membership. However, there has been no decisive breakthrough in public support for joining NATO.

There has, in contrast, been much more enthusiastic levels of support for NATO membership among members of the mainstream political parties. A notable example is Sweden's decision to support [NATO-led actions in Libya](#) – support that was badly mismanaged and which was viewed as a betrayal of non-military intervention by some observers. Since becoming Swedish Defence Minister in 2014, Peter Hultqvist has been responsible for pursuing closer [integration](#) into NATO and further eroding the historical legacy as part of the so-called 'Hultqvist Doctrine'.

The impact of the Russia-Ukraine war

All of this raises the question of whether the Russia-Ukraine war might tip the balance toward Sweden – and potentially other countries that are traditionally associated with a neutral or non-aligned security stance – joining NATO. Although it is plausible that the crisis will not be allowed to 'go to waste' and that we will see more active lobbying for NATO membership within Sweden, at least in the short to medium term, full NATO membership is unlikely to happen.

What we have seen is the natural first step being taken by the [Swedish government](#) of adopting the rhetoric of the Euro-Atlantic liberal order, which has condemned Russia's military actions and expressed solidarity in support of Ukraine. This is in keeping with the standard political act of value and virtue signalling in foreign policy and symbolic of Sweden's perception of itself as a liberal force for good in the world.

Yet this conception of Swedish 'neutrality' and of the country being a force for peace and good in the world is contradicted by the Swedish government's pledge to [deliver weapons to Ukraine](#). Another point that was very quickly clarified by the Swedish Prime Minister was that Sweden does not have the immediate intention to seek NATO membership.

Even though, in terms of collective memory, Russia's invasion is viewed as another act that threatens Ukrainian and even European security, the [NATO option](#) has therefore not yet been put on the table as a result of the war. This is in no small part due to the massive divisions that exist within Swedish society over the NATO debate, where [public opinion](#) is relatively evenly divided between the yes, no and undecided camps. The disparity between political support and public support for NATO membership remains a key obstacle.

One thing that is abundantly clear is that the Russia-Ukraine War will [re-ignite a debate over Sweden's NATO membership](#) that has been relatively dormant for some years. In the foreseeable future it seems that the principles of the Hultqvist Doctrine shall remain, which will be complemented by a gradual and sustained nudging of public opinion towards a more positive reception of NATO membership. With this stated, this is potentially a risky strategy given the general election that is scheduled in Sweden for September this year.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
