



# Hasanuddin Journal of Strategic and International Studies

ISSN: 2963-1394 (Online) Journal Homepage: <https://journal.unhas.ac.id/index.php/hjsis/>

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To cite this article:

Fiadi, I. R. (2024). Towards NATO Membership: Looking into the End of Sweden's Neutrality Amidst Strategic Shift in Europe. *Hasanuddin Journal of Strategic and International Studies (HJSIS)*, 2(2), 65-83.

To link to this article:

<https://doi.org/10.20956/hjsis.v2i2.34700>

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# Towards NATO Membership: Looking into the End of Sweden's Neutrality Amidst Strategic Shift in Europe

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## Abstract

The year 2022 marked the re-outbreak of a chaotic war, between Russia and Ukraine, in Eastern Europe. While military attacks between the two warring countries were not directed to countries around the region, and Sweden does not have a shared border with both countries, Sweden decided to apply for NATO membership a few months after the war began. This decision contradicted with Sweden's long-standing tradition of neutrality in foreign affairs for almost two centuries. Using the framework of neoclassical realism along with the concept of alliance, the shifting stance is explained through systemic incentives and intervening variables, which comprised of (1) the inconsistency in the utilization of Russian military capabilities and (2) the European Union's defense challenges; (3) the Swedish military posture, (4) the Swedish Prime Minister's perception, and (5) the majority support within the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament). This research also indicates that Sweden's neutrality would be maintained during international competition or the growth of alliances with significant power capabilities in the region. However, the neutrality did not extend to non-military aspects such as trade and transportation access.

## Key Words

Alliance, NATO, Neutrality, Neoclassical Realism, Sweden

## 1. Introduction

Sweden, a Nordic country with the most significant area, is unique in its geographical location and historical principles. It shares its borders with three countries: Norway to the north and west, Finland to the east, and Denmark to the southwest. The eastern part of Sweden is embraced by the Baltic Sea, which connects it directly to Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Kaliningrad (a Russian exclave). One of the most intriguing aspects of Sweden's history is its application of the principle of neutrality (Möller & Bjereld, 2010), a policy it shares with Finland in the Nordic region until 2022.

Sweden's initial embrace of neutrality can be traced back to the Napoleonic Wars, a significant conflict that occurred from 1803 to 1815, entangling various European powers in the struggle between Napoleonic France and its adversaries. The aftermath of Sweden's defeat by Russia in this war led to the signing of the Treaty of Fredrikshamn (also known as the Treaty of Hamina) in 1809 (Malmborg, 2001b). This treaty marked the conclusion of the Finnish War between Sweden and Russia, resulting in Finland's surrender to Russia and Sweden's obligation to terminate its previous alliance with Great Britain (Karonen, 2010). In 1834, amidst increasing tensions between Russia and England, Sweden announced its neutrality. This position was upheld

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through a foreign policy that avoided aligning with any nation or participating in armed conflicts (Westberg, 2015). Within this historical context, neutrality denotes the principle of impartiality proclaimed to the global community when potential or actual conflicts emerge among multiple nations (Müller, 2019).

In the 20th century, Swedish neutrality was evident in several international conflicts, such as World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. While initially neutral in World War I, Sweden eventually became involved and maintained trade relations with countries on both sides of the conflict, including Germany and Great Britain (Wahlbäck, 1986). Similar practices were observed in World War II, as Sweden reaffirmed its neutral stance while engaging in cooperative relations with Germany (Malmborg, 2001b). This cooperation extended to providing transit access for German troops and war equipment within Swedish territory when Germany occupied Norway and Denmark. Despite declaring neutrality during the Cold War, Sweden joined the European Commission in 1967 (Gustavsson, 1998), demonstrating that Swedish neutrality did not exclude close cooperative relations with the West.

In the early 21st century, Europe's stability was tested by security issues. The aggressive stance of Russia, led by President Vladimir Putin, posed a significant challenge for Western countries and disrupted security in Europe. For instance, Russia intervened militarily in Georgian territory in 2008 (BBC, 2008). In 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and intervened militarily in the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine. These actions were perceived as a threat by nearly all European countries, including Sweden (Al Jazeera, 2014). In response to the intervention in Georgia, Sweden diplomatically criticized Russia and firmly demanded that it comply with international law. Sweden also suspended joint military training with Russia, which had been ongoing before (Regeringskansliet, 2008). A diplomatic approach also characterized Sweden's reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Sweden urged Russia to engage in diplomatic discussions with the Ukrainian government and adhere to international law (The Local, 2014). Sweden and other Nordic countries issued a joint declaration in response to the crisis in Ukraine, diplomatically calling on Russia to respect international law and agreements (Szary, 2015). This approach demonstrated Sweden's tendency to align with Western views and rationally opposed Russian policies in the region.

Russia's aggressive actions have persisted, the latest being its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This invasion called a "Special Military Operation," involved crossing the Russian-Ukrainian border into the eastern regions of Chernihiv, Kharkiv, and Luhansk. Additionally, Russian forces began occupying Odesa and Mariupol in Southern Ukraine by sea (Al Jazeera, 2022b). Russian President Vladimir Putin justified the invasion by asserting that a neo-Nazi regime had taken over Ukraine (BBC, 2022). He also accused Ukraine of targeting and killing the Russian-speaking population in Eastern Ukraine (Hinton, 2022). Furthermore, he cited NATO enlargement and Ukraine's potential membership in the alliance as a threat to Russia's national security (Al Jazeera, 2022). President Vladimir Putin believed that Ukraine joining NATO could lead to the expansion of NATO's military presence and a significant increase in military capabilities in Ukraine. He also contends that NATO serves as an extension of the United States' foreign policy and aims to support an 'anti-Russia' movement in Europe. This concern stems from the competitive nature of the relationship between NATO member states and Russia in global politics.

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has not only impacted Sweden's perception on Russia, but has also raised concerns on its national security. The Swedish government has vehemently denounced Russia's invasion into Ukraine, viewing it as a threat to Europe's security landscape (Regeringskansliet, 2022). Despite not sharing a direct border with Russia, Sweden was acutely aware that Russia's actions in neighboring countries could potentially

jeopardize its own borders, creating an immediate and precarious border situation. Countries near conflict zones are frequently used by warring parties for weapons supplies and escape routes, leading to political and security disruptions. This could directly impact Sweden's national security, necessitating an urgent reassessment of its defense strategies and policies. In March 2022, approximately 50,000 Ukrainian refugees arrived in Sweden and were provided accommodation (Regeringskansliet, 2023b). This situation prompted the Swedish government to allocate extra resources to manage the influx. However, there was a growing unease among the Swedish public due to rumors about the possible use of Russia's nuclear weapons. The mere prospect of such an event could lead to a nuclear war, an escalation of the conflict, and a humanitarian disaster, which was deeply concerning (Tharoor, 2022). In the same year, the Swedish government predicted that inflation would reach about 7.3% and 3.9% in 2023, higher than previous forecasts of 6.1% and 2.9% (Reuters, 2022b).

In the midst of economic and political disruption, the Swedish government shifted its position. On May 18, 2022, Sweden and Finland submitted an application for NATO membership. An official letter outlining their shared vision was sent to NATO's Secretary General. On June 28, 2022, a trilateral memorandum was signed by Turkey, Sweden, and Finland, marking a significant milestone in Finland and Sweden's journey toward NATO membership (NATO, 2022). The accession protocols for Sweden and Finland were then signed on July 5, 2022 (NATO, 2023), signaling a new chapter of regional cooperation and security.

This article examines the research question of why Sweden sought NATO membership during the Russo-Ukraine war in 2022. It is structured as follows: The first and second sections outline the framework and research method used. The article then delves into the application of Sweden's neutrality policy from its initial application to the Cold War era. The fourth section explores European security dynamics at the beginning of the 21st century, paying close attention to Sweden's stance on the events. The following sections will address how systemic incentives and domestic factors determine Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership. The final section will conclude the overall discussion by emphasizing the Sweden's determinant factors and its neutral behavior.

## **2. Analytical Framework**

The framework used in this research is neoclassical realism and the concept of alliance. Neoclassical realism is an international relations theory developed in the post-Cold War era, around the 1990s. This theory combines the earlier theoretical schools of realism: classical realism and neorealism. By integrating both, neoclassical realism seeks to elucidate a state's behavior or foreign policy from the systemic incentives, as posited by neorealism, as well as from internal or domestic factors, as argued by classical realism (Rose, 1998). Consequently, neoclassical realists argue that foreign policy is shaped by external factors (systemic incentives) and how states interpret these factors in light of their internal circumstances (intervening variables).

The following framework used is the concept of alliance. According to Robert Osgood, an alliance is a formal agreement that binds states to cooperate in using their military resources against a particular state. It usually requires one or more of the signing states to use force or consider the use of force in certain circumstances. Osgood's definition implies that alliances are formed to deter other states from committing aggression. Additionally, the definition requires a formal agreement between countries as legally binding (Robert, 1986).

This research also adopts Anna Wieslander's concept of informal alliances. Osgood's alliance concept relies on a formal understanding of alliances based on forming written international agreements. However, Wieslander emphasizes that alliances can also be informal. If a formal

alliance is formed by signing a written agreement, then an informal alliance is an alliance-based commitment not contained in a formal agreement (Wieslander, 2019). Parenthetically, the parties involved in an informal alliance are still considered as parties who are trusted and sided with by their member states.

### **3. Research Method**

The research utilized a qualitative approach to analyze data and investigate the research question proposed in the concluding part of the introduction section. It delved into information provided by Sweden, NATO, and other pertinent authorities, including agreements and speech transcripts. Additionally, the research drew on relevant data from sources such as news, reports, books, and journal articles. The temporal scope of this research is confined to the period from the 1800s to 2022.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### **4.1. The Implementation of Sweden's Neutrality Policy**

In 1834, Prince Charles XIV declared the principle of Swedish neutrality in response to Sweden's defeat by Russia in the Napoleonic Wars in 1812. Though not explicitly stated in the Swedish constitution, Swedish neutrality is a fundamental component of the country's foreign policy. This principle signified Sweden's commitment to not engage in any present or future wars. It also reassured Russia that Sweden would remain uninvolved in any armed conflicts. Sweden was particularly concerned about the escalating tensions between Great Britain and Russia (Westberg, 2015). This declaration positioned Sweden as a 'buffer zone' between major European military powers.

If Sweden were to get involved in the war and enter into an alliance with Great Britain, this would provoke Russia, leading to Sweden and its surroundings becoming a war zone again. Thus, the implementation of Swedish neutrality by Prince Charles XIV was intended to maintain balanced relations with the Great Powers at that time, Great Britain and Russia (Killham, 1993). The principle of neutrality applied to Sweden's foreign policy was in sharp contrast to its expansionist foreign policy before the 19th century, which often led to conflicts with surrounding countries for centuries (Lockhart, 2004).

In 1914, when World War I began, Sweden declared its position to remain neutral in the war between Serbia and Austria-Hungary. Sweden also declared neutrality in the war between Germany, France, and Russia (Wahlbäck, 1986). Besides, Sweden had reasonably good diplomatic relations with surrounding states. For instance, it signed a Non-Aggression Pact with Norway on August 8, 1914, which ended Norway's perception of Sweden as a potential enemy. This perception might have been impacted by the end of the Norwegian-Swedish Union, which had existed from 1814 to 1905, and Norway's memories of the Swedish invasion, particularly in 1716 (Barton, 2005; Powell, 2006).

During World War I, Sweden chose a policy of neutrality due to its non-interventionist stance, trade dependence on the warring parties, and its status as a small country in Europe (Qvarnström, 2014). By abstaining from the war, Sweden affirmed a Non-Aggression Pact with Norway, which positively impacted its reputation as a peaceful nation, encouraging cooperation with other countries. Despite its neutrality, Sweden still engaged in various economic partnerships, notably with Germany, its important trade and logistics partner (Kubala, 2021).

Sweden re-declared its position as a neutral state when World War II began on 1 September 1939 (Riksdag, 1939). Denmark and Norway declared their neutrality on 9 April 1940. However, in June 1940, Germany pressured Sweden to sign a transit agreement, allowing German logistics and troops to pass through Swedish territory while accessing the route from Norway to Finland.

Germany occupied Norway and Denmark, making Sweden feel vulnerable and forced to agree to Germany's demands. As a result, around 250,000 German troops transited through Swedish territory to and from the battlefield until 1943 (Malmborg, 2001).

Sweden ended its transit agreement on 29th July 1943 when Germany's position weakened (Wahlbäck, 1986). Sweden responded more to Allied pressure to limit its trade with Germany due to the changing geopolitical context, leading to the Allied-Swedish Agreement in September 1943. Under this agreement, the United States and Britain allowed increased exports of oil and rubber to Sweden. In exchange, Sweden agreed to stop allowing German military equipment and troops to transit through Sweden. Sweden also committed to further reducing its iron ore and ball-bearing exports to Germany. From that point on, Sweden gradually stopped exporting goods to Germany on Swedish ships until August 1944 (Gilmour, 2011).

Before the Cold War era, Sweden became a member of the United Nations (UN) in 1946. Sweden believed that the UN provided a platform for peaceful resolution and an opportunity to encourage international cooperation (Makko, 2012). In 1948, Finland and the Soviet Union signed an agreement on "friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance," preventing Finland from officially joining the Western bloc (Rearden & Kaplan, 1985). Sweden aimed for the Nordic countries to form a neutral bloc to secure the Northern region and attempted to establish a Scandinavian defense cooperation arrangement. However, the negotiation efforts failed after Norway and Denmark joined NATO in 1949 (Steene, 1989). As a result, Sweden and Finland remained neutral and did not align with any alliance.

In February 1954, several neutral states, including Sweden, Switzerland, and Finland, received the Soviet Union's Molotov Proposals to reach an agreement on continental security issues without the involvement of the U.S. (Nuenlist, 2008). Sweden rejected the proposal, as seen from the Swedish Foreign Relations Council meeting on 19 November 1954, where Sweden expressed its unwillingness to participate in a collective security alliance in Europe (Undén, 2002). However, Sweden remains open to increasing international cooperation in the economic and trade sectors. On 28 July 1967, Sweden applied for membership to the European Commission (EC), expressing its willingness to engage in negotiations on membership, associations, and free trade agreements (European Union, 2012). Sweden, Switzerland, and Norway reached a bilateral free trade agreement with the European Commission in 1972 (Gstöhl, 2002).

During the Cold War, on 19 March 1975, Sweden declared its neutrality. This declaration responded to the growing tensions between the US and the Soviet Union on both regional and global levels and the increasing militarization during the Cold War. In the 1990s, Sweden became more involved in European affairs and eventually joined the EU in 1995 (Makko, 2012). Sweden generally supports the EU and views it as an essential trade, security, and environmental cooperation platform. However, it is challenging to state that Sweden has left its neutral stance by joining the EU, as it has also managed military relations with the Soviet Union/Russia (Bengtsson, 2016).

#### **4.2. European Security Dynamics in the Beginning of the 21st Century**

The European security landscape experienced significant changes in the post-Cold War. These changes included the disappearance of the bipolar system between the US and the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, and other events (SIPRI, 1992) all contributed to these changes. In the early 21st century, the European security landscape was significantly impacted by several major events. Key security issues in the region during this time included the Tuzla Island conflict in 2003, the Russia-Georgia War in 2008, the Nagorno-Karabakh War, and the Russo-Ukraine War.

In 2003, a territorial dispute over the ownership of Tuzla Island between Russia and Ukraine broke out. Russia claimed that the island has historical and cultural significance for Russians and, therefore, should be under Russian control (Murphy, 2023). Based on this claim, Russia built a dam connecting the Taman Peninsula with Tuzla Island without prior consultation with Ukraine. Ukraine stated it would not grant access to the dam and insisted that the Tuzla Island is under Ukraine's sovereignty. Later, Ukraine deployed a security guard of around 300 troops, air force maneuvers, and border guard ships to the island of Tuzla and around Crimea (Brunet-Jailly, 2015). Sweden had no direct involvement in this conflict. Likewise, the EU, of which Sweden is a member, abstained from involvement in the conflict (Natorski, 2018).

In 2008, a war broke out when the Russian military attacked Georgia. Two other parties involved in the conflict were the Republic of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which had unilaterally declared their regional autonomy from Georgian territory and were allied with Russia (Emerson, 2008). Sweden condemned Russia's military intervention against Georgia. On 18 August 2008, Sweden announced terminating its military ties with Russia over the invasion (Regeringskansliet, 2008). As for seeking a resolution, the EU mediated a ceasefire agreement in August 2008 (University of Edinburgh, 2008). The agreement was not a peace settlement but rather a six-point agreement to gradually reduce the military conflict in South Ossetia by withdrawing each armed force from that region. Russia kept this agreement and withdrew its troops from Georgia. After the five-day Georgian war in 2008, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are still formally recognized as part of Georgia. In April 2009, NATO stated that Georgia and Ukraine could become members. NATO also considers that Russia is not fully complying with the ceasefire agreement that has been reached. NATO called on Russia to rescind its recognition of sovereignty over the Republic of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (NATO, 2009). This problem continues to be an international issue, as this article has discussed.

In 2020, the war began when Azerbaijan launched an offensive across territory held by the Armenian military and local forces of Nagorno-Karabakh separatists seeking to secede from Azerbaijan. The Nagorno-Karabakh War that occurred in 2020 was a conflict over territory involving Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the state of Artsakh, which broke away from Armenia. This armed conflict has roots that can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century. After several failed attempts by Russia, France, and the United States to negotiate a ceasefire, Russia succeeded in brokering an agreement on November 9, 2020 (Center for Preventive Action, 2023). This support was also manifested in the deployment of Russian peacekeeping troops. This military support ended the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which lasted six weeks. At this stage, Azerbaijan reclaimed most of the territory lost two decades earlier, leaving Armenia with only part of Karabakh. In November 2020, the EU issued a declaration welcoming the cessation of hostilities in and around Nagorno-Karabakh and calling on all parties to continue to respect the ceasefire to prevent humanitarian catastrophe (Council of the European Union, 2020).

The Russo-Ukrainian war began in 2014 and was marked by several significant events, including the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the war in Donbas, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The annexation of Crimea was a response to the overthrow of Ukraine's pro-Russian President, Viktor Yanukovich, in the Maidan revolution. Russia perceived Yanukovich's removal as a threat to its impact in Ukraine and the wider region (Kononczuk, 2014). Following the annexation, the pro-Russian Aksyonov Government was formed in Crimea, leading to its unilateral declaration of independence on March 16, 2014 (Somin, 2014). Aksyonov and other Crimean officials still consider Viktor Yanukovich as Ukraine's *de jure* president, as he had facilitated their support from Russia. Sweden condemned the annexation and declared its refusal to recognize Russia's illegal actions while also considering the possibility of joining NATO. The



annexation of Crimea also prompted discussions in Swedish political circles regarding the country's military defenses.

On September 30, 2021, Ukraine officially applied to join NATO following Russia's annexation of Southern and Eastern Ukraine (NATO, 2023). In response, Russia deployed 'Special Military Operations' in an invasion of Ukrainian territory on February 24, 2022. In his initial statement, the Russian President stated that this attack aimed to support the independence of the Donetsk and Luhansk people. This event resulted in a prolonged war between Ukraine and Russia. Due to Ukraine's status as NATO's informal ally, Ukraine did not receive a full guarantee in terms of defense, as stated in Article 5 of the Atlantic Treaty. However, as the outcome of the informal alliance, Ukraine still receives economic and political support and limited military aid from the Western bloc. The EU member states again strongly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The EU has implemented ongoing restrictive measures against Russia in response to its illegal annexation of Crimea and Donbas since 2014. This caused a deterioration in diplomatic relations and resulted in prolonged sanctions against Russia by the EU and the United States since 2014 (Council of the European Union, 2023) ;Marcin Szczepański, 2023). The sanctions included freezing assets and imposing travel bans on Russian officials. These prolonged sanctions were a political tool for Russia to deter attempts to annex Crimea.

The annexation of Crimea and Russia's invasion of Ukraine created tensions between Russia and Western countries. Russia's aggressiveness ultimately prompted many European countries to re-evaluate their defense posture and military investments (Reuters, 2022). Sweden's support for Ukraine has become increasingly visible, and the country provides military support, humanitarian aid, and civilian assistance. Since February 2022, Sweden has contributed over 2.1 billion Euros to various initiatives supporting Ukraine. Similarly, Sweden's budget planning for national defense was increased to reach 2% of Sweden's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (AP News, 2023). Sweden's next initiative was to seek to join NATO during the chaotic Russo-Ukrainian war in 2022.

#### **4.3. Sweden's NATO Memberships Application**

Sweden has had a cooperative relationship with NATO, recorded since at least 1994, when it joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program (Ulvskog, 2004). The form of cooperation carried out by the two is broadly in the form of cooperation to increase security and military operations in the peacekeeping agendas. The cooperation between both parties is categorized as the informal ally, in which they have trust and commitment to each other yet do not legally bind. Sweden's efforts to cooperate with NATO are increasing and firm, as seen from its application for NATO membership in 2022. Considering that Sweden claims to have implemented the principle of neutrality in its foreign affairs, the following sections will explain the factors behind Sweden's shifting its traditional position by intending to join NATO membership based on an analysis in Sweden's systemic and domestic level.

#### **4.4. The Inconsistency in Utilization of Russian Military Capabilities**

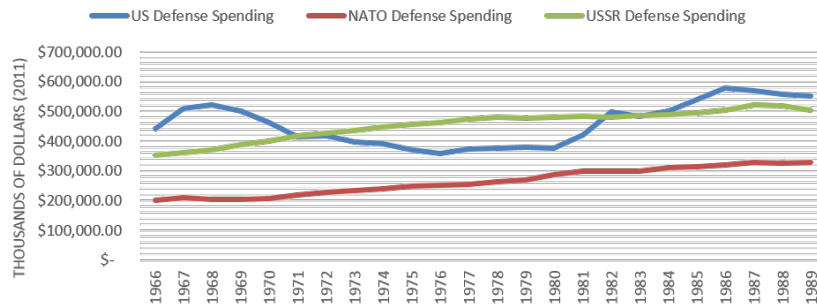
In the early 21st century, Russia's military policy became increasingly aggressive, as evidenced by its involvement in various conflicts in Europe, from the dispute over the island of Tuzla to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. This aggressiveness has raised serious concerns among neighboring countries due to Russia's possession of nuclear capabilities and its significant impact on global politics. Despite facing international criticism and sanctions for its involvement in conflicts, Russia's aggressive behavior has not diminished. Interestingly, Russia's growing aggression seems disproportionate to its actual military capabilities. At the start of the 21st



century, Russia's military strength was relatively weak, and it had even experienced a decline compared to its power capability during the Cold War era as part of the Soviet Union.

An increase in Russia's security policy around the Baltic Sea has been noted. Russia has an exclusive-shaped area, including Kaliningrad, located between Poland and Lithuania on the coast of the Baltic Sea (Federation Council of Russian Federation, 2023). Russia has bolstered its military capabilities in the region, exemplified by the Zapad military training conducted in 2017 and 2021 (Barros, 2021). This military training is a cooperative effort between Russia and Belarus to enhance their military preparedness and capabilities. European countries and NATO have expressed concerns about the lack of transparency surrounding the Zapad exercises (Emmott, 2021). They have criticized Russia for not providing enough information regarding the scale and objectives of the exercise. Russia has also deployed the Iskander-M missile in Kaliningrad, a short-range ballistic missile system developed by Russia with advanced technology in 2014 (Reuters, 2016). Although Baltic countries and NATO raised concerns, Russia has maintained the right to deploy the missiles (Lowe, 2018).

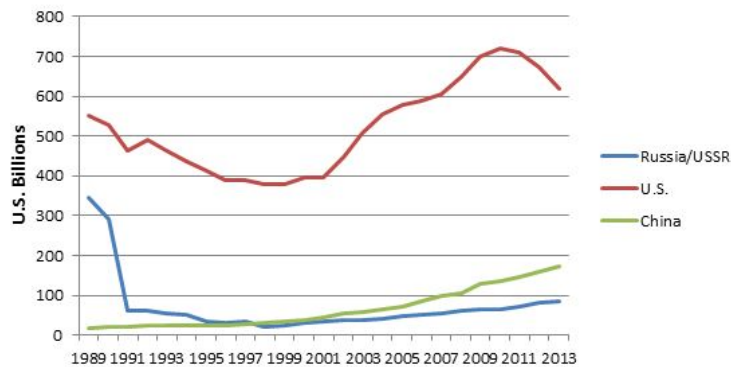
Russia's military capabilities in the contemporary era are relatively limited and inferior to those of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This can be explained, for instance, by the amount of defense spending during the Soviet Union and Russia. The amount that the Soviet Union spent was very competitive with the amount that the US spent during the Cold War.



**Figure 1.** Cold War Defense Spending

Source: Data from US Naval Institute, "Presence Vs. Posture"

The defense spending of the Soviet Union and the US was highly competitive in some years, such as during 1971-1972 and 1982-1984. The Soviet Union's spending also exceeded the amount of US defense spending in the period 1973-1980. At that time, the Soviet Union spent almost \$500 billion, while the US spent only about \$400 billion.



**Figure 2.** Military Expenditure in the Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Russia, U.S., and China

Source: Data from US Naval Institute, "Presence Vs. Posture"

In contrast to the Soviet Union's sizeable military expenditures during the Cold War, Russia's military expenditures have decreased and are much lower than those of the US. In the early 21st century, Russia even competed with China. From 1991 to 2013, Russian spending did not reach \$100 billion. This contrasts with the US's spending, which averaged over \$400 billion from 2001 to 2013 (US Naval Institute, 2016).

Russia's military capabilities are currently not as strong as the US's in terms of military expenditure, number of aircraft carriers, amphibious warships, cruisers, destroyers, frigates, nuclear submarines, military aircraft, helicopters, and military satellites (Blank, 2021). Russia's military capabilities are lower than those of the US. While Russia has made significant efforts to modernize its military in recent years, it still trails behind the US. Although Russia's military capabilities cannot be compared to those of the Soviet Union and are inferior to those of the US, its aggressive policies towards the region have noticeably intensified. This heightened aggressiveness from Russia creates a perception of threat towards the Western bloc. Sweden's application to NATO was driven by the systemic incentive of Russia's increasing aggressiveness. However, Russia's military power at the beginning of the 21st century was limited. Sweden considers Russia a threat, but it also dares to prefer NATO as a 'guarantor' in terms of defense through being a formal ally.

#### **4.5. The Challenge of European Union's Defense**

In 1995, Sweden became a member of the European Union (European Commission, 2023). Despite mainly having an economic and political focus initially, the EU has also aimed to establish itself in security and defense. Evidence of this can be found in the EU's security and defense policy framework, designed to ensure the security and stability of its member states (European Parliament, 2023). This framework involves various forms of cooperation, covering security, defense, counter-terrorism, cyber security, and crisis management. However, the EU's defense capabilities are still not as robust as those of NATO, primarily due to the lack of a fixed or permanent military command and the limitations on the military capabilities of its member states.

The EU has implemented a Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), which provides EU defense capabilities based on EU Treaty Article 42.2. EU defense resources depend on the 'willingness' of its member states to contribute resources to various missions and ad hoc military operations based on the CSDP, as contained in the EU Treaty Article 44. The contribution of military resources is voluntary and based on only the capabilities of member states. Member states' contributions range from six months to one year, after which the contributions will be replaced by other member states (CSDP, 2013).

This defense capability is divided into two military formations: Eurocorps and EU Battle Group. The main differences are the number of troops, deployment missions, and authority. The EU Battle Group has around 1000 troops who can be deployed to handle crises within the EU and operates under EU authority. Meanwhile, Eurocorps has around 2,500 troops that can be deployed inside and outside the EU and operate under the EU's and NATO's authority (CSDP, 2013). Neither Eurocorps nor the EU Battle Group have a standing military command. A permanent military command is essential for the EU to respond swiftly and in an integrated manner to emerging security challenges and crises. Meanwhile, NATO has a permanent military command. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), the highest-ranking military officer in NATO, is responsible for the overall command of NATO military forces in Europe.

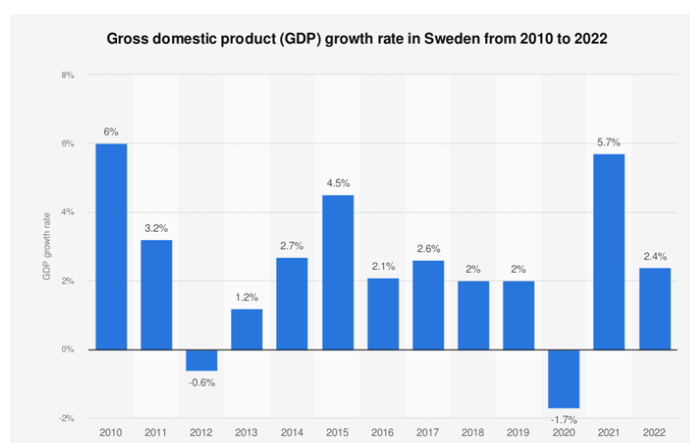
The military capabilities of EU member states are not as strong as those of the US military. Simply increasing the defense spending of EU member states may not be enough to match the US and Russia's defense spending. In 2022, the US was estimated to be 39%, while Russia was

estimated to be 9.2% of the world's defense spending. In comparison, the highest defense spending among EU members is by Germany at 2.5%, followed by France at 2.4%, and Italy at 1.5% of the world defense spending. However, these figures are significantly higher than Sweden's, which only contributed 0.3% of the world military defense expenditure in 2022 (SIPRI, 2023).

The lower defense spending of EU countries compared to the US could be due to the EU's defense dependence on the US through NATO. Since at least the end of World War II, the US has increased the impact of its security policies on EU members. US troops stationed in Europe are around 70,000 military personnel (Shapiro, 2019). The US has demonstrated its commitment to protect Europe and make European countries focus on their internal issues. The lower EU defense spending is due to avoiding duplication of defense, where almost all EU member states are NATO member states. The accumulation of limited EU defense capabilities makes EU defense dependent on the US through NATO. Through the same logic, NATO's formal alliance would bring the privilege of sharing the capabilities and the means of delivery.

#### 4.6. Swedish Defense Posture

Sweden has a sufficient economy, but its military capabilities are less competitive than Russia's. The strength of the Swedish economy is reflected in its high GDP, which reached \$55,689.4 in 2022, ranking 11th in the world in terms of GDP. Sweden's GDP has shown consistently stable growth since 2010. The figure below shows the GDP growth rate from 2010 to 2022 (Statista, 2023a).



**Figure 3.** Sweden's GDP Rate from 2010 to 2022

Source: Data from Statista, "Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Growth Rate in Sweden from 2010 to 2022"

The average of Swedish GDP has been increasing by more than 2% every year, with only two declines: 0.6% in 2012 and 1.7% in 2020. Despite these declines, the GDP has consistently risen in subsequent years, indicating a strong economy for Sweden. While Sweden's economic capabilities are significant, its military capabilities do not match up to Russia's. Sweden has a well-equipped and professional military, but it is not as substantial or aggressive as Russia's. From 2011 to 2022, Sweden's military spending has significantly increased each year (Statista, 2023b). In 2011, Sweden's military expenditure was \$3.75 billion, and by 2021, it had reached \$6 billion. In 2021, Sweden ranked 32nd in terms of countries with the highest military spending. However, this spending is substantially lower than that of the United States, which reached \$877 billion, and Russia, which reached \$292 billion in the same year (SIPRI, 2023).

The defense capabilities of Sweden were not as competitive as Russia's. In 2019, Sweden had 66,000 active military personnel, four submarines, 150 combat aircraft, and 120 tanks (Hedlund, 2019). However, these numbers are significantly lower than Russia's military strength, which included approximately four million active military personnel, 15,398 tanks, 3,547 combat aircraft, and 60 submarines in 2017. Despite the 2017 data being two years prior to the 2019 data, Russia's military capabilities far exceed those of Sweden.

In a worst-case scenario where Sweden was to face an attack from Russia and find itself in an armed conflict, joining the NATO alliance would be a rational choice for Sweden. This is primarily due to Sweden's comparatively limited military capabilities compared to Russia. A formal alliance with NATO could bolster Sweden's military strength and provide potential assistance from NATO member states, particularly the US. On the other hand, if Sweden were to remain an informal ally, it could face challenges in maintaining its political and security stability under external pressure, similar to the situation in 1940 when Germany pressured Sweden to sign a transit agreement. However, it is important to note that Sweden would need to increase its national defense budget to 2% of its total GDP if it were to join NATO. This would require maintaining economic stability and being prepared to allocate resources to support fellow NATO member states.

#### **4.7. Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson's Perception**

Sweden operates under a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy, which means that the political system incorporates elements of both monarchy and democracy. The Prime Minister serves as the head of government and has a strategic role in making policy decisions. The Prime Minister provides leadership and direction in foreign policy matters. Magdalena Andersson held the position of Swedish Prime Minister from November 30, 2021, to September 11, 2022. At the beginning of her tenure, she emphasized Sweden's commitment to maintaining neutrality, expressing her unwillingness to join NATO. This was stated in her speech on November 30, 2021:

*"Our non-participation in military alliances serves our country well and contributes to stability and security in Northern Europe. Sweden will not apply for membership of NATO. Sweden will not take a passive stance if another Nordic country or EU Member State suffers a disaster or an attack, and we expect these countries to act in the same way if Sweden is affected. The EU is Sweden's most important foreign and security policy arena..."* (Regeringskansliet, 2021)

The statement above defines that the traditional Swedish position of not taking sides is in the right position. However, the statement also implied that Sweden would abandon its passive position if the region had a real security threat. Even though she did not desire to become a member of NATO at this stage, Andersson stated that she could strengthen her alignment with the EU. In the statement, it was also seen that Andersson was trying to bring Sweden to remain solid in defense cooperation between the EU and the Nordic countries. This demonstrates Sweden's alignment with the West and has the potential to join NATO if it feels like a crisis. In her speech on November 30, 2021, Prime Minister Andersson also expressed her concern about Russia's previous aggressiveness:

*"Sweden and the EU condemn Russia's military aggression towards Ukraine and its illegal annexation of Crimea. The situation of the people who are stuck at the border between Poland and Belarus is unacceptable."* (Regeringskansliet, 2021)

This reflects her view of Russia as a country that has violated international law and negatively impacted countries in the region. The condemnation and sanctions imposed against Russia are expected to decrease its aggressiveness. However, Andersson's policy direction changed when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. This indicates that Andersson perceives Russia as a severe threat to Sweden's and regional security. This can be seen from Prime Minister Andersson's statement in special debate on security policy at the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament) on 16 May 2022:

*“The invasion of Ukraine shows what Russia is ready to do, and we must consider the possibility of Russia taking equal risks in our immediate neighborhood. This is the security policy reality that we now need to relate to, and in that reality, Sweden needs the formal security guarantees that come with membership in NATO.”* (Sveriges Riksdag, 2022)

The statement above indicates that Prime Minister Andersson negatively perceives Russia's aggressiveness. She believed that Russia's aggression threatened the security of the surrounding area and, therefore, advocated for the need for definite security guarantees through a formal alliance. The shifting perception has led Prime Minister Andersson, who initially showed no interest in NATO membership at the beginning of her tenure, to express interest in formal alliance membership. However, it is also worth noting that Prime Minister Andersson is affiliated with the Social Democrat party and positions herself as its leader.

#### 4.8. Majority Support within the Riksdag

The Riksdag is Sweden's highest legislative body, with 349 members of parliament as regulated in the Constitution of 1809 (Britannica, 2023a). It plays a crucial role in the Swedish political system by making decisions on laws, policies, and government. Swedish citizens elect their members of parliament through a proportional representation system in general elections held every four years. The distribution of parliamentary seats is proportional to the number of votes each party obtains. The composition of the Riksdag for 2018-2022 can be seen in the table below (Valmyndigheten, 2022).

**Table 1.** Composition of Political Parties in the Riksdag (2018-2022)

Political Party	Share of Votes (%)	Number of Mandates
Moderate Party	19,84	70
Centre Party	8,61	31
Liberal Party	5,49	20
Christian Democrats	6,32	22
Social Democrats Party	28,26	100
Left Party	8,00	28
Green Party	4,41	16
Sweden Democrats	17,53	62
Feminist Initiative	0,46	-
Other Parties that have notified its participation	1,07	-

Source: Data from Valmyndigheten, “Election results 2018”

The table shows the number of Riksdag members from different national parties. The Social Democratic Party has the most members of parliament with 100 seats. The Moderate Party has 70 seats, the Swedish Democrat Party has 62 seats, the Center Party has 31 seats, the Left Party

has 28 seats, the Christian Democrat Party has 22 seats, the Liberal Party has 20 seats, and the Green Party has 16 seats. The Swedish Social Democratic Party has held a majority of parliamentary seats since 1932 (Britanica, 2023).

During a 2016 Riksdag plenary session in Sweden, the Moderate Party expressed its support for Sweden's NATO membership. Hans Wallmark, speaking for the party, emphasized the urgency of Sweden's NATO membership due to Russia's previous threats, such as the annexation of Crimea, military activities near Sweden, including the placement of missiles in Kaliningrad, and the threat of Russian nuclear weapons against Denmark. The Moderate Party has consistently advocated for a referendum on NATO membership and maintains its unchanged support for joining the alliance (Khorrami, 2022; Sveriges Riksdag, 2016).

In contrast to the Moderate Party's position, the Social Democratic Party, represented by Margot Wallström, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sweden, Anders Österberg, and Hillevi Larsson, prefer that Sweden remain free from defense alliances. They stated that Sweden's military impartiality benefits regional security stability and, therefore, they prefer to actively engage in the nuclear disarmament agenda through an impartial cooperation framework (Sveriges Riksdag, 2016). Similarly, the Left Party, represented by Stig Henriksson, said that NATO membership would result in the loss of Sweden's foreign policy independence. Henriksson also emphasized that the threats facing Russia come from both sides, as both Russia and NATO have nuclear powers. The Green Party also added that NATO membership would expand the use of nuclear weapons, which contradicts Sweden's global mission of nuclear disarmament.

On March 16, 2022, the Riksdag held security policy discussions following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The report of the discussions was issued on May 13, 2022. Based on the discussion results report, the Swedish government chose to apply for NATO membership on May 16, 2022 and held a follow-up discussion meeting (Regeringskansliet, 2023a). In the meeting agenda on May 16, 2022, Prime Minister Andersson, who comes from the Social Democratic Party, stated that joining NATO would provide better security guarantees for Sweden (Sveriges Riksdag, 2016). The decision would increase Sweden's defense capabilities. This shows a shift in the position of the Social Democratic Party, which previously opposed the alignment of the Swedish military. Ulf Kristersson, the leader of the Moderate party, found common ground with the Social Democratic party. Kristersson advocated for Sweden's NATO membership, expressing concerns about Russia's increasing assertiveness over the last twenty years. He argued that NATO would provide Sweden with a more dependable security guarantee, as stated in Article 5 of the Atlantic Treaty.

Jimmie Åkesson of the Democratic Party recently voiced his perspective on the matter. He mentioned that his party, which historically favored non-alignment, has transitioned to supporting NATO membership due to Russia's increasing aggression and its impact on the security stability of Sweden and the region. Åkesson also highlighted that the Democratic Party has been advocating for an increase in the defense budget for several years, and joining NATO is viewed as a positive step towards bolstering Sweden's defense capabilities. This statement reflects a noticeable shift in the stance of the Democratic Party, which was previously a strong advocate of neutrality.

The pro-alliance proposal faced opposition from only two parties: the Left Party and the Green Party (Sveriges Riksdag, 2022). Nooshi Dadgostar, the Leader of the Left Party, emphasized that Sweden's 200 years of neutrality had been beneficial and suggested that the issue of NATO membership should be considered after the upcoming parliamentary elections. Per Bolund, the leader of the Green Party, expressed that the decision seemed rushed and should be delayed until the next parliamentary election. Both parties agreed that while Russia poses a significant threat, they argued against Sweden rushing into supporting NATO and instead advocated imposing strong sanctions against Russia.



The meeting dynamics indicated a majority's endorsement for the Swedish parliament to join NATO. With the Social Democratic party, the leading party, transitioning from opposition to supporting Sweden's NATO membership, a clear consensus emerged. Most parliamentarians perceive Russia as increasingly aggressive and expansionist, citing events such as the Georgian War in 2018, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2022. Given the potential threat to Sweden's territorial integrity, the majority of members believe that NATO provides a more robust security guarantee for the country.

## 5. Conclusion

This article delves into the driving factors that led to Sweden's significant 2022 application for NATO membership, taking into account both external and internal factors. The systemic analysis brings to light the inconsistency in the utilization of Russian military capabilities and the EU's defense challenges. In the 21st century, Russia's military capabilities, while not as formidable as during the Soviet era, have seen a recent surge in aggression with several invasions particularly in the European region. The recent developments have created a perception of potential threat to Sweden. As a result, Sweden views NATO as a more reliable guarantee of security. Sweden has determined that EU membership no longer adequately addresses its security requirements. The limitations of the EU in the defense sector have impacted Sweden's decision to seek NATO membership. Moreover, it perceives that the EU's defense capacity relies on the US through NATO. For instance, the EU lacks an independent command structure for military cooperation. Additionally, the EU's military capabilities are significantly weaker than those of Russia. These considerations at the international level have spurred discussions within the Swedish parliament about the urgency of Sweden's application for NATO membership in 2022.

It is important to note that several internal factors contribute to Sweden's decision to seek NATO membership in 2022. These factors include Sweden's military capabilities compared to potential threats, Prime Minister Andersson's stance on national security, and the support for NATO membership within the Riksdag. Firstly, Sweden's military defense posture is perceived as insufficient compared to Russia, a country viewed as a threat to Sweden's security. This is evident in global rankings of military strength, where Russia holds a high position while Sweden is omitted. Secondly, Prime Minister Andersson's perception of Russia as an aggressive state has impacted the consideration for NATO membership. Her stance shifted after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which heightened the perceived threat from Russia. Third, a noteworthy shift has occurred within the Riksdag, with a majority of parliamentarians supporting NATO membership. This change is particularly significant as it marked a departure from historical views, especially within the Social Democratic Party, whose members have traditionally opposed NATO membership. The shift in perspective is largely attributed to growing concerns over Russia's recent aggressive actions.

The research also indicates that Sweden remains dedicated to upholding its policy of neutrality in foreign affairs, in the face of international competition and the evolution of alliances with significant power capabilities in the region. Throughout history, Sweden has tended to align with the stronger party in situations involving a single dominant power. The country's neutrality primarily concerns its military's impartiality in conflicts and does not extend to non-military aspects like trade and transportation access. Nevertheless, by formalizing its alliance with NATO, Sweden seeks to align itself with the West and position itself as an active contributor to the world's most powerful defense alliance. It is imperative for Sweden to thoroughly evaluate the potential security implications of this shift, as it could potentially make the country more susceptible to security threats from Russia.

## Acknowledgement

I wish to recognize especially those who are providing instrumentals in terms of substantial guidance and discussion to this research: Mutiara Pertiwi, Ph.D. (the State Islamic University Jakarta), Dr. Pascal Lottaz (Kyoto University), and Naman Habtom-Desta (the University of Cambridge).

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