Beat: News

NATO Membership for Sweden 'A Small Step for Military'

Policy Analysis by Jacqueline Feldscher

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AFSDATA partner Defense One - NATO Membership for Sweden Would Be ‘A Small Step For The Military, But A Giant Leap For The Political System’
It would be just a “technical step” for the militaries to formally join, a Swedish military official said.

Looking nervously to the East, Sweden and Finland are considering giving up their long histories of military independence by joining NATO, a potentially seismic shift driven by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

A decision to apply for membership would kick off a protracted political process and reshape European geopolitics, but Swedish military officials have no qualms about integrating with allies with whom they already train and fight closely.

Sweden has regularly worked with NATO for more than two decades, including conducting joint exercises and operating on the battlefield together in Bosnia, Kosovo, Libya, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Lt. Gen. Michael Claesson, the Swedish chief of joint operations, told Defense One at the Swedish Embassy in Washington this week. The military already knows that its technology and values are interoperable with the alliance.

“The standards and the procedures and the colleagues and friendship are there already. In that regard, it’s a rather technical step to become a full member for the military,” said Claesson, going on to paraphrase Neil Armstrong: “A small step for the military, but a giant leap for the political system.”

For decades, Sweden and Finland have pursued a policy of neutrality and declined to join NATO. Even last month, after Putin sent forces into Ukraine, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said that joining the alliance would “further destabilize this area of Europe.” But as Putin’s unprovoked and brutal attack continued, both Finland, which shares a 830-mile border with Russia, and Sweden, which faces it across the Baltic Sea, have warmed to the idea. Both countries' parliaments are currently debating the issue. Last week, Andersson said that “the security landscape has completely changed,” while Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin said her country will make a decision on applying in “weeks.”

Russia’s invasion has influenced the publics in both Nordic nations as well. A poll released Thursday found that 51 percent of Swedes supported joining NATO, a six-point increase from a similar poll just a week before. That number jumps to 64 percent if Finland also joins the alliance, and experts all predict the two countries will act together.

“They have not made a decision yet, so the train has not left the station already, but indeed all signals are on green currently,” said Pierre Morcos, a visiting fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Opinion polls have dramatically shifted in terms of joining the alliance, political parties are reconsidering their historical reluctance to join NATO” and “both countries have prepared the necessary steps to join the alliance.”

The process of joining the alliance is typically long and arduous, beginning with conversations about the country’s goals and changes it would need to make to be aligned with NATO. Potential applicants can then join the Membership Action Plan program to help meet the criteria to join, including having a democratic political system and treating minority populations fairly. All NATO members must unanimously agree to admit the applicant, and each member’s governing body must approve the application.

The process of approving Finland and Sweden, however, would likely move much faster. Previous applicants, many of whom were former Soviet states, have needed years to learn Western military doctrine and begin using Western military equipment, said Christopher Skaluba, the director of the Atlantic Council’s Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security. But Finland and Sweden already train and operate with NATO, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said both countries could “easily” join if they decide to apply.

“Finland and Sweden are completely different. They’re advanced democracies….They’re Western militaries in every sense of the word,” Skaluba said. “The way we’ve done NATO enlargement for the last 25 years, it just doesn’t apply to Finland and Sweden in the same way.”
Rep. Don Beyer, D-Va., who co-chairs the Friends of Sweden Caucus, said he expects Congress would quickly approve Finland and Sweden’s membership, especially because Russia’s invasion of Ukraine negates any concerns that accepting members on Russia’s border would anger Moscow.

“I think that ship has sailed. I don’t think we’re worried about whether we’re going to upset Russia by having NATO members so close,” Beyer told Defense One. “When their reaction to the sphere of influence is to invade, they’ve given up any right to demand that we not include NATO countries on their borders.”

Some critics argue that defending Finland’s long border with Russia would be a “burden” to NATO, but Skaluba pointed out that Finnish forces have been successfully defending that border for decades. Claesson stressed that Sweden and Finland would both be “immediate net contributors” to NATO, and Beyer said their presence in the alliance would mean more troops in the neighborhood to protect vulnerable countries on the eastern front with smaller militaries.

“The more members of NATO, the stronger NATO is,” Beyer said. “If we’re thinking about Article 5 guarantees, that would mean more close well-armed, well-governed nations to help a Poland or an Estonia in case there ever were a Russian incursion.”

Ensuring a quick accession to NATO for Sweden and Finland would give Russia, which has threatened to deploy nuclear weapons in the Baltic Sea region if the countries join the alliance, a smaller window to attack the countries in retaliation for applying before they had the Article 5 security guarantee provided by the alliance. Officials also are likely working behind the scenes to figure out how to offer both countries some level of protection if Russia did attack while their applications are being considered.

“If we have a two-year-long process, that opens up a large window for chaos, which you want to avoid,” Skaluba said. “The U.S. or U.K. could say if you apply for membership, we’ll look favorably on it and come to your support in the event that Russia should cause some kind of disruption.”

That could, however, prove politically difficult, given that Ukraine applied for membership in 2008 and has received no protection from NATO during the Russian invasion, though allies have sent a huge influx of weapons to help Ukrainian fighters.

Beyer predicted the United States would help protect Sweden and Finland if Moscow attacked while their application to NATO was still being considered.

“My inclination would be strongly to honor the Article 5 guarantee as if it were already in place,” Beyer said. But he also questioned whether Russia would be able to mount an attack against Finland and Sweden given how much combat power it has lost during the war in Ukraine.

“Russia is running a two-front invasion against countries who do not want them and deeply value their own independence and freedom, that doesn’t seem that likely,” he said.

Even if a conventional invasion is unlikely, Russia could still target Finland and Sweden with cyber or disinformation warfare, both areas where the European Union has “a strong toolbox,” Morcos said. Though NATO’s Article 5 would not automatically apply, Finland and Sweden are both members of the European Union and would have protection under Article 42.7, which means an attack on one member is perceived as an attack on all.

“If they were attacked by Russia, they could trigger that clause and ask for assistance from all EU member states,” Morcos said. “I expect they would step up and make sure they are fully supported in such a situation.”

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