

Has Sweden abandoned its role as an international mediator by joining NATO?



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Sweden has long been associated with neutrality and non-alignment—a stance rooted in its experience of staying out of both World Wars and the Cold War military blocs. For over two centuries, the country cultivated a foreign policy identity centered on peace diplomacy, multilateralism, and humanitarian values. However, in May 2022, amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Sweden made a historic decision to apply for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), marking a profound shift in its security and foreign policy doctrine.

Remaining outside military alliances gave Sweden credibility as a trusted broker of peace. With NATO membership, many now ask: has Sweden abandoned this mediator identity?

A break with tradition

Sweden's non-alignment policy was more than a strategic choice; it was a core part of its national identity. While not formally neutral since joining the European Union in 1995, Sweden maintained military non-alignment, relying on robust national defense and close partnerships—particularly with Finland, the EU, and NATO—without committing to binding defense obligations.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 transformed the European security landscape. The longstanding belief that large-scale war in Europe was unlikely collapsed overnight. Swedish public opinion, historically skeptical of NATO, shifted rapidly. Within months, a majority of Swedes supported joining the alliance, and the government submitted its application alongside Finland in a coordinated move.

Strategic realignment

Sweden's NATO application represents a strategic realignment with far-reaching implications. Membership in the alliance means Sweden is now covered by Article 5—NATO's collective defense clause—an unprecedented move for a country that once prided itself on acting as a mediator and bridge-builder in global conflicts.

At the same time, Sweden brings unique capabilities to NATO. Its advanced defense technologies, especially in air defense and submarine operations, complement the alliance's northern posture. Its geographic position also strengthens NATO's ability to secure the Baltic Sea region, where tensions with Russia remain high.

Balancing values and security

This shift also presents a diplomatic balancing act. Sweden has built much of its international reputation on promoting peace, gender equality, disarmament, and international law. As a NATO member, it must now navigate an alliance that includes states with differing values and priorities, while preserving its commitment to a rules-based international order.

Sweden's accession also illustrated the realities of alliance politics. While Finland's membership was swiftly ratified, Sweden faced delays due to objections from Turkey and Hungary, highlighting the geopolitical bargaining that can shape even security-based decisions.

Looking ahead

Sweden's turn toward NATO marks the end of one era—but not the abandonment of its core diplomatic values.

In practical terms, its foreign policy has evolved, not reversed. It is now a full participant in NATO's strategic planning and defense cooperation, responding to new threats in a shifting global environment.

However, Sweden's broader identity—rooted in multilateralism, human rights, and conflict prevention—remains central. What has changed is its security alignment, not its diplomatic commitment.

In essence, Sweden has adapted to new geopolitical realities. While it may no longer be perceived as a neutral mediator, it can continue to champion international cooperation, democratic resilience, and human rights as a **principled voice within alliances**. Thus, its NATO membership does not erase its legacy of peace diplomacy—it redefines the context in which that legacy continues.

The challenge moving forward will be maintaining a careful balance between strategic security interests and the values-based foreign policy Sweden has long upheld. Its extensive experience in mediation and diplomacy may now serve a new purpose: helping to strengthen the alliance it has joined while keeping space for dialogue, restraint, and peaceful conflict resolution in today's complex geopolitical landscape.

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