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# Sweden: a special NATO partner?

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## Sweden: a special NATO partner?

Among the policy agendas advanced during his tenure as NATO's Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen has been a robust advocate for the creation of new and enhanced partnerships for the Alliance. Many states have cultivated closer ties to NATO during his leadership, including Australia, Ireland, South Korea, New Zealand and Mongolia. But Sweden certainly ranks near the top among those whose bonds have been strengthened and improved.



Sweden and NATO share many priorities. Whether it is protection of human rights abroad, promotion of democracy, advancement of women, or the willingness to respond to crises and threats, these priorities have become increasingly evident during Secretary General Fogh Rasmussen's tenure.

But Sweden is no newcomer to NATO. Since the onset of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994, of which Sweden was an initial member, this "neutral" ally has been anything but ambivalent to NATO or its transition to a post-Soviet world.

In NATO's operational environment, Sweden has been consistently present too, whether on the ground with peacekeepers in Bosnia and Kosovo, or in the Indian Ocean in EU and NATO anti-pirate policing operations.



Since 2006, Sweden has had civilian and military professionals on the ground in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. It has played a leadership role in a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Mazir-e-Sharif and has 400 people on the ground helping to advance political and economic stability in the surrounding region. As it works on the transition to Afghan-led teams, Sweden will work with NATO Allies Norway and Latvia, as well as with NATO partner Finland. In doing so, Sweden not only advances democratic development abroad, but also gains a seat at the table in shaping Alliance policy directions.

But it was during NATO's Operation Unified Protector in Libya that Sweden reached a new level of partnership, which has no parallels among partner states.



The first notable aspect was how quickly Sweden responded to the 2011 Libyan crisis. After the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1973 and NATO requested Swedish assistance to the operation, the Swedish parliament quickly authorised Sweden's participation in the mission, in a vote of 240 to 18 with 5 abstentions. Though public opinion polls across Europe varied, most Swedes strongly favoured of their country's engagement. The domestic political debate in Sweden over its military engagement for the mission was

quite limited.

The Swedish parliament authorised the contribution of eight Swedish Gripen aircraft, a C-130 "Hercules" refuelling aircraft, and one Gulfstream IV surveillance aircraft. In addition, 130 Swedes helped carry out the mission. Within two days of Sweden's parliament's decision, the Gripens were ready in place at Sigonella Air Base in Sicily.

Though the Swedish parliament placed an important caveat on the Gripen's role, including a prohibition against the use of force on ground targets, the Swedish Air Force still found significant ways to assist the Alliance. Over the course of the entire operation, which was Sweden's first air deployment since the 1960s United Nations operation in the Congo, Swedish planes flew 570 operations. Some of these missions were simply police enforcement of the no-fly zone. Its C-130s also carried out refueling operations.



More importantly, by midway through the operation, the Swedes had provided at least 30 per cent of all reconnaissance sorties. It was here, along with the diplomatic significance and benefit of having Sweden's cooperation, where Sweden provided the most meaningful and substantive assistance to the Allies.

In all, Sweden provided 2,770 reconnaissance reports to NATO. Due to past training exercises with the Allies, and because of the excellent capabilities evident in its Gripen aircraft, Sweden deserves high marks for the quality of its interoperable defences and excellent troops. Sweden's defence investments and industry have clearly kept pace, at least on this measure, with military advancements within the Alliance. Such a military contribution has few peers among partner nations, and for NATO and the Allies, again demonstrates just how valuable a partner can be.



In a forthcoming publication, Swedish defence expert Robert Egnell makes a strong case that it was partly Sweden's activities in the EU's Nordic Battle Group that allowed it to respond so rapidly to NATO's request for assistance. When the crisis unfolded, Sweden was participating in its rotational training exercises with the Battlegroup, which helped foster a rapid response to NATO's request for assistance. Sweden's previous participation in other NATO operations and training exercises also paved the way for a relatively easy transition into Unified Protector.

Despite domestic political concerns over full membership of NATO, Sweden and its public have demonstrated how a NATO partner can truly assist the Alliance, while simultaneously advancing its own national foreign policy priorities. This partnership allows Sweden to excel where its strengths are evident, and gives Sweden a place in NATO's diplomatic and operational settings. Put simply, both sides benefit.