

NATO MEMBERSHIP AN OPPORTUNE MOMENT FOR A SWEDISH INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY

by
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As Hungary finally [approved](#) the Swedish application to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), over 200 years of formal neutrality and non-alignment has [come to an end](#). With this, the last major hurdle for Swedish aspirations to join the military alliance has been overcome as Hungary was [dragging out](#) the process, much to the confusion of many political commentators. Earlier, in January, Turkey was [finally](#) convinced to vote for the application, after a long holdup following many rounds of negotiations and a political deal between Sweden, the U.S. and Turkey.

While initially Sweden set itself on the path of non-alignment and neutrality following the end of the Napoleonic Wars, there are many aspects of modern Swedish foreign policy, especially after the Cold War that have led to doubts about any de facto neutrality in the Swedish case. Perhaps most notably, Sweden's 1995 accession to the European Union (EU) but also through the country's close relationship with NATO, exemplified by joint military exercises and an army that [largely conforms](#) to NATO standards in terms of equipment and command structures.

This previous, in all but name, alignment allows Sweden to quickly adapt to the various practical needs and requirements that are expected of full-fledged NATO members. As such, entry into the Atlantic security network will prove to be a relatively smooth transition. Consequently, Sweden – as a country oftentimes ascribed with being able to punch above its weight in international politics – is presented with a window of opportunity. Despite [fears](#) of NATO membership limiting its ability to act, abandoning the notion of neutrality which in reality has eluded the country for a long time may prove to enhance the Swedish ability to influence the course of international affairs in a manner which the self-imposed neutrality

had hitherto put the brakes on.

Shift towards the Indo-Pacific

In Europe, the divide is quite clearly demarcated by NATO and Russia and their respective spheres of influence, especially as the war in Ukraine finds the continent dealing with its greatest challenge to stability since the fall of the Soviet Union. In other parts of the world, however, the divide is not as clear. This is becoming a matter of increasing consequence as the center of political and economic power [shifts](#) from the Atlantic theatre to what is increasingly being labeled the Indo-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific, as the name suggests, incorporates both the Indian and Pacific Oceans. While this region has been important in world politics for centuries, in modern times it has taken on a gradually crucial role as it houses an increasingly complex network of economic interconnectivity and interdependence with many rapidly growing economic and military powers, most notably China. Unlike popular terms like the Asia-Pacific, the [conceptual idea of the Indo-Pacific](#) emphasizes the importance of the maritime aspect in the region and its significance for interconnectivity and international trade, moving the focus from the mainland to the ocean.

Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Coalition of Like-minded Countries

In 2016, Japan set the agenda for liberal democracies in the Indo-Pacific region by launching its so-called Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision. Japan's ambition in the Indo-Pacific region emphasizes a strengthening of the rule of law, freedom of the seas, free trade, and, crucially, an opposition to challenges to the political status quo. In order to achieve this, other [like-minded](#) countries need to join the common cause. Japan's FOIP is by design an inclusive and open project which Sweden would easily be able to contribute to and become a part of given its previous [engagement](#) in the region. Indeed, Sweden and Japan share many common areas of concern in the Indo-Pacific. The desire to promote a rules-based order is a fundamental common interest. Likewise, sustaining trade routes, supply chains and freedom of navigation are particularly important for the two nations, especially as the long-negotiated EU-Japan [Economic](#)

[Partnership Agreement](#) has started to take effect.

Both Sweden and Japan are champions of promoting efforts to curb climate change while promoting sustainability as well as humanitarian assistance and other development investments. Despite not having its own Indo-Pacific strategy, in its capacity as the then presidency of the Council of EU, Sweden hosted the [EU-Japan Indo-Pacific ministerial meeting](#) in Stockholm in the summer of 2023. Prior to the meeting, then Japanese foreign minister made a point to highlight the [potential for cooperation](#) not only between Japan and the EU but also in the case of Sweden.

Swedish Positioning against China

Although [not expressly](#) stated as so, one key aspect of the Japanese FOIP is its role as a counterweight to the growing Chinese attempts at increasing its economic influence in the region through massive diplomatic projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, primarily sponsoring infrastructure investments but also accused of lacking transparency and long-term sustainability. As the EU has identified China as an [economic competitor and a systemic rival](#) and launched its own EU-wide [Indo-Pacific strategy](#), for Sweden, much like its neighbor and fellow fresh NATO member [Finland](#), the incentives to engage in the Indo-Pacific are steadily increasing.

Sweden now finds itself faced with a window of opportunity to engage in the region, with like-minded partners like Japan and Germany, among others. The NATO framework should encourage following in the steps of other traditionally careful countries, like Germany, in showing at least a [symbolic military commitment](#) while seriously participating in addressing challenges to [economic security](#) in the Indo-Pacific to further Swedish interests in the region.

Although geographically distant, Swedish [public opinion on China](#) mirrors that of Japan, according to survey data. Given both public opinion and general consensus in the Riksdag, attempts at lessening Chinese influence on Swedish economic interests will undoubtedly not prove to be very controversial.

Sweden is well aware of the dangers of deepening its relationship with China, for instance given what happened to [Lithuania](#) and the economic pressure put on it after angering China. But this extends not only to economic ties but also in a normative sense challenging core Swedish values on [human rights and democracy](#). The impact of the Indo-Pacific concept is significant, considering Chinese [distaste and rejection](#) of the concept. Instead of hiding behind the EU, Sweden – maintaining its self-perception as [humanitarian superpower](#) – ought to join its fellow like-minded countries and formally adopt the Indo-Pacific concept to show its support and commit upholding to the rules-based order that is in line with Swedish values.

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