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CONTEMPORARY MILITARY-POLITICAL COOPERATION BETWEEN GERMANY AND SWEDEN IN THE CONTEXT OF MILITARISATION: FROM INTERCONNECTEDNESS TO COMPLEMENTARITY

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Germany and Sweden have significantly increased military spending and have also sought to dramatically expand their armed forces, distinguishing themselves from several other NATO member states in this regard. A key objective of this militarisation is to enhance their contributions to NATO's deterrence posture against Russia, thereby advancing their respective leadership aspirations within the Alliance. At the same time, cooperation has consistently outweighed competition in German-Swedish security and defence collaboration. This article examines the dynamics and evolution of this military-political partnership in the late 2020s, with particular emphasis on Sweden's NATO accession in March 2024. Methodologically, it draws on political neorealism and theories of armed forces development. Historically, the two states' peaks of power never coincided, sparing them large-scale conflict and creating a favourable backdrop for cooperation. In the mid-1990s, West Germany viewed Sweden's de facto rapprochement with NATO positively. This process gained greater scale and depth amid the Euro-Atlantic confrontation with Russia that intensified after 2014. Germany pursued a strategy of gradual and consistent deterrence; in the mid-2010s, Berlin still considered formal Swedish NATO membership overly provocative, communicating this stance through the N3 + 1 format (2014–2019), which involved the Nordic EU member states. By the end of the decade, however, Germany had come to accept and actively support Sweden's abandonment of its non-aligned status, as evidenced by the N5 + 1 platform (from 2019, encompassing all five Nordic states) and high-level bilateral contacts. The study compares both countries' militarisation models. Germany particularly values Sweden's reinstatement of conscription in 2017, which has substantially boosted troop numbers, especially in ground forces. It details Armed Forces cooperation in manning NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups in the Scandinavian-Baltic region, including

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geographic burden-sharing. Special focus is given to the risks posed by strengthened German-Swedish eFP contingents, particularly concerning potential attempts to blockade the Kaliningrad region from the east. The conclusions identify the drivers of harmonisation achieved by Berlin and Stockholm in coordinating their military-political plans and actions under NATO auspices.

Keywords:

Germany, Sweden, negotiation formats, militarisation, Baltic region, NATO, deterrence, Russia, Kaliningrad region

In the first half of the 2020s, European NATO member states significantly tightened their approaches to the “deterrence” of the Russian Federation. The Alliance’s capabilities as an organisation have increased markedly [1; 2], particularly along the forward edge of its area of responsibility [3]. Militarisation at the national level has been manifested primarily in a notable increase in defence spending, the development of new weapons systems, and the expansion of defence industries. At the same time, many NATO member states, including the largest ones (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France), have not significantly expanded the size of their armed forces. This pattern has been especially evident across North America and Western, Northern, and Southern Europe.¹ An exception to this trend was observed in several Eastern European countries, most notably Lithuania and Poland, as well as in Germany and Sweden. Germany has gradually embarked on a large-scale expansion of its armed forces. By the time of its accession to NATO in March 2024, the Kingdom of Sweden had already entered a phase of substantial growth in the size of its armed forces.²

Official Berlin retained its position as the largest contributor to NATO military groups after the United States.³ Sweden, for its part, has sought to assume a comparable role in Northern Europe. However, the parallel nature of these ambitions has tended to foster cooperation rather than competition. In the context of efforts to shape a new international order, the shared objective of ensuring its maximum possible Western orientation, particularly towards EU member states, has brought the German and Swedish establishments into closer alignment [4; 5, p. 3–6]. In both countries, these establishments are largely composed of adherents of liberal values, including a commitment to multilateralism [6; 7]. This orientation has been reflected in practice: like Germany, Sweden has sought to make a substantial contribution to the manning of NATO’s multinational forces. In doing so, both states have highlighted their enhanced capabilities relative to many other European members of the Alliance, as well as their practical value in the context of the intensifying confrontation with Russia. Accordingly, both Germany and Sweden have demonstrated a clear ambition to expand their roles

¹ Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014–2024), 2025, Brussels, NATO, p. 13.

² Ibid.

³ Russland darf und wird diesen Krieg nicht gewinnen, 2022, Bundeskanzleramt, 07.06.2022, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/bundeskanzler-in-litauen-2047754> (accessed 19.11.2025).

within the Euro-Atlantic community and to advance their leadership claims. To this end, they have developed close cooperation, characterized by a mutually beneficial distribution of responsibilities.

The article aims to examine cooperation between Germany and Sweden in the field of security and defence in the mid-2020s. To this end, the study pursues the following objectives: to analyse the historical background of bilateral relations; to examine the system of political and diplomatic contacts, with particular attention to negotiation formats; to assess the current militarisation strategies of Germany and Sweden; and, on this basis, to identify trends in cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries.

Comparative analysis is employed to examine the functioning of the N3+1 and N5+1 formats involving Germany and Sweden, as well as to compare their respective approaches to national-level militarisation.

Methodologically, the study draws on theories of political neorealism (structural realism), as well as on approaches to military force development. A central tenet of neorealism, namely that foreign policy is effective only to the extent that it aligns with the expectations of other actors [8, p. 92–93], is illustrated by the case of Germany–Sweden interaction. This is reflected in a consistent effort to maintain mutual support by taking into account each other's preferences and concerns. Paradoxically, Germany has demonstrated an even stronger inclination in this regard. Although disputes over seniority may shift in form, becoming more latent or, at times, more explicit, their underlying nature has remained constant in Germany's relations with most major European NATO members. This is evident, for example, in Germany's relations with Poland [9] and even with France [10]. Accordingly, Germany has had a particular need for the support of its most reliable small and medium-sized partners within NATO, including Sweden.

The theory of military force development interprets changes in force structure — including the creation and disbandment of units, as well as deployments beyond national borders — as indicators of substantive shifts in a state's foreign policy priorities [11]. These propositions are directly applicable to the cases of Germany and Sweden: both states have embarked on large-scale militarisation while simultaneously sharply expanding the overseas deployment of their forces, particularly in the Scandinavian–Baltic region.

Russian and international scholars have produced a substantial body of research on the activities of the Federal Republic of Germany in the international arena. Within the Northern European dimension of German foreign policy, scholarly attention has more often focused on Germany's activities in the Arctic and its relations with Norway [12; 13], while its dialogue with Sweden has received comparatively less attention. Similarly, analyses of Berlin's strategic activity in the Baltic region have tended to prioritise Germany's interactions with the Baltic States (particularly Lithuania) and Poland [9; 14; 15], rather than its relations with Stockholm [16, p. 3; 17, p. 4–6].

In analyses of Sweden's contemporary foreign policy, scholarly attention has primarily focused on its accession to NATO. Researchers have examined the drivers behind this fundamental decision [18; 19, p. 3], the dynamics of Sweden's departure from its policy of non-alignment [20–23], and the implications for

security, particularly for the Russian Federation [24–26]. At the same time, the evolution of Stockholm's bilateral relations with most of its Alliance partners has remained a peripheral topic in the literature.

The study is based primarily on publicly available documents from the defence and foreign ministries of Germany and Sweden, as well as from the Federal Chancellery of Germany, and on official NATO materials. This ensures a high degree of verifiability of the findings. These sources contain a substantial volume of empirical data, particularly statistical information, which makes it possible to construct a comprehensive and sufficiently detailed picture of the subject under study and to trace, without interruption, the course and substance of contacts between the leaderships of the two states.

Historical and political trends in the relations

The favourable context for contemporary dialogue is largely explained by the fact that the respective periods of peak power of Germany and Sweden in early modern and modern history did not coincide chronologically. As a result, the number of conflicts in which Berlin and Stockholm were direct adversaries has been limited. During Sweden's great power era (1611–1721, though its decisive decline began in 1709), much of the German lands remained politically fragmented. In the Swedish (1630–1635) and Franco-Swedish (1636–1648) phases of the Thirty Years' War, a number of smaller northern German states supported the army of Gustav II Adolf, viewing it as a guarantor of Protestant religious freedoms. Under the Peace of Westphalia (1648), parts of Pomerania came under Swedish control. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Brandenburg and later Brandenburg-Prussia made repeated, largely unsuccessful attempts to assert control over Pomerania. Sweden, having effectively turned the Baltic Sea into an "inland lake," increasingly shifted its strategic focus eastwards. This shift is reflected in the Great Northern War (1700–1721), in which Russia inflicted decisive defeats on Sweden, bringing an end to the kingdom's status as a great power.

As a result, Sweden's power and influence were critically undermined. This demonstrates the Swedish contribution to wars in the following century, up to and including the era of the anti-Napoleonic coalitions. As a result of participation in the latter (1815), Stockholm transferred its Pomeranian possessions to Prussia (but Sweden received Norway), thereby being spared from participation in military conflicts for the unification of Germany in 1864–1871. Sweden, de facto since 1815, and de jure since 1834, began to define its foreign policy as a policy of permanent neutrality [18; 23]. In practice, however, it was not always fully observed. During the Crimean War, Sweden prepared to enter the conflict against the Russian Empire as part of the coalition led by Great Britain and France (the so-called November Treaty of 1855), but the end of hostilities prevented this. Against the backdrop of alliance formation in Europe, the German Empire sought to conclude a military convention with formally neutral Sweden in 1910 and encouraged Stockholm to engage in active military cooperation in the Baltic during the First World War [27]. Both this conflict and the Second World War ended with Germany's capitulation. At the same time, between 1940 and 1945,

Sweden's neutrality was broadly favourable towards the Third Reich. In addition to large-scale deliveries of iron ore — important for tank production — Sweden permitted the use of its territory for extensive Wehrmacht transit, primarily in support of German forces in the Far North [18].

During the Cold War, West Germany was regarded as firmly integrated into the community of “Western democracies” and made a significant contribution to the “deterrence” of the USSR and its allies. With the consent of the Western powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France), the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) joined the North Atlantic Alliance in 1955 and subsequently embarked on a large-scale rearmament. Given its location on the front line of confrontation and the salience of the “German question”, the territory of the FRG served as the West's principal bastion in countering the East. The Bundeswehr, together with NATO forces deployed in West Germany, formed a unified military-strategic complex.

Sweden, for its part, continued to maintain its policy of non-alignment. Nevertheless, Bonn and Stockholm cooperated closely in the field of security and defence throughout the Cold War. How can this apparent paradox be explained? A key unifying factor was their shared commitment to a capitalist system, albeit one with a strong social orientation. In addition, both states pursued economic and, to a certain extent, military cooperation in the western Baltic, which carried a clear anti-Soviet dimension.

The Swedish establishment, particularly its conservative wing, viewed West Germany's substantial contribution to the “deterrence” of the USSR as indirectly supporting the preservation of Sweden's neutrality. At the same time, the governments of the two countries led by Social Democrats displayed a notable degree of coordination, most prominently under Willy Brandt in West Germany (1969—1974) and Olof Palme in Sweden (1969—1976). Both leaders played a significant role in reducing tensions in Europe and globally. Moreover, Palme's return to office (1982—1986) coincided with the “second Cold War”, when Germany, under Chancellor Helmut Kohl (CDU/CSU), adopted a markedly more stringent approach to the deterrence of the USSR.

During the accelerated resolution of the “German question” (February—September 1990), Stockholm generally adopted a favourable stance towards the Federal Republic of Germany. The FRG succeeded in incorporating the territory of the former GDR. This outcome was formalised in the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany of 12 September 1990. Under the terms of the treaty, Germany acquired full sovereignty, following the renunciation by the victorious powers of their rights and responsibilities, and retained its membership in NATO. At the same time, it undertook a voluntary and indefinite renunciation of the production, possession, and control of weapons of mass destruction, and agreed to cap the size of its armed forces at 370,000 personnel, including no more than 345,000 in the ground forces and the air force. These limits were to apply

upon the completion of the withdrawal of Soviet (later Russian) troops from the territory of the former GDR.¹ This event took place on 31 August 1994 and had a major impact on the policies of both Germany and Sweden.

Both countries began to play a more prominent role in the activities of Euro-Atlantic institutions in the field of security and defence. As early as September 1994, Germany began to support the eastward expansion of NATO into the post-socialist space and significantly intensified the deployment of the Bundeswehr beyond the Alliance's area of responsibility. An illustrative example is the precedent-setting deployment of the Luftwaffe in air operations conducted under NATO auspices against the Republika Srpska (August–September 1995) and Serbia (March–June 1999). Through these actions, Germany sought to strengthen its position as a regional military and political power and to assert itself among the leading NATO member states (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France). For its part, Sweden began to move closer to NATO as early as the end of 1994, when it joined the Partnership for Peace programme.²

In 1995, Sweden, as part of a group of European countries with non-aligned status (also Austria and Finland), joined the EU, which also meant joining the common foreign and security policy (CFSP) of the European Union. As a result, the Kingdom's neutral status became conditional. At the same time, Sweden has begun to send contingents to NATO missions outside the bloc's area of responsibility. This was a key manifestation of Sweden's strategy towards the Alliance: to cooperate increasingly closely *de facto*, but not to join *de jure*.

For Germany, this approach proved highly advantageous, not only because it enabled the development of practical cooperation with a partner within both the EU and NATO frameworks. Berlin and Stockholm also shared a similarly high threshold for the use of force, which differed markedly from the lower threshold characteristic of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. This convergence with Sweden made it easier for Germany in the early twenty-first century to assert its distinct position *vis-à-vis* other Western powers on questions of the use of force beyond the Euro-Atlantic area, most notably in the context of the Iraq War in 2003.

At the same time, the two countries actively cooperated in conducting non-combat operations under the auspices of NATO: in the Balkans (in Bosnia in 1995–2003 and Kosovo since 1999) and especially in Afghanistan as part of the activities of *ISAF* in 2003–2014. The Swedish units operated as part of the multilateral forces of Regional Command North, where the role of the “framework nation”, that is, the key contributor and coordinator, had belonged to Germany. This cooperation continued in 2015–2021, when the *Resolute Support Mission* (RSM) was launched as a new NATO mission, replacing *ISAF*. Its main task was no longer peacekeeping, but to provide security sector reform, help to

¹ Vertrag vom 12. September 1990 über die abschließende Regelung in Bezug auf Deutschland (Zwei-plus-Vier-Vertrag), 2025, *Auswärtiges Amt*, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/regelbasierte-internationale-ordnung/voelkerrecht-internationales-recht/240218-240218> (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Relations with Sweden, 2025, *NATO*, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52535.htm (accessed 19.11.2025).

train and advise the local (Afghan) army and police. After ISAF was replaced by the RSM mission, both the overall scope of the operation and the size of the German and Swedish contingents were reduced; however, the distribution of their roles within Regional Command North remained unchanged.¹ The experience of cooperation in Afghanistan since the mid-2010s has been applied in Mali [28, p. 22–24] through both the EU military training mission (EUTM Mali) and the multi-dimensional UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA). Within the last one, Germany had played the role of a “framework nation” in the matter of tactical reconnaissance and the functioning of the military base in Gao.²

At the same time, since the early 2010s, non-aligned Sweden has significantly lowered its threshold for the use of force. Germany, as a member of NATO, demonstrated considerable inertia and, consequently, strategic restraint in this regard until the mid-2010s. This divergence became evident during the NATO air campaign against Libya (March—October 2011), in which the Swedish Air Force participated, while the Luftwaffe did not.³

From the spring to the autumn of 2014, immediately after the onset of confrontation between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, Sweden’s declared approach to “deterrence” proved more stringent than Germany’s. Notably, Sweden reacted cautiously to the proposal to establish the Normandy format in June 2014. Germany, however, as the initiator of the format, regarded this negotiating platform as necessary for engaging Russia in a controlled and demonstrative dialogue, with the dual aim of preventing uncontrolled escalation and promoting a consolidated Western position on Ukraine. This approach contributed to the limited effectiveness of the Normandy format, a sharp decline in the frequency of meetings by the end of the 2010s, and its eventual loss of relevance in the context of Russia’s special military operation.

Features of modern political dialogue

Germany pursued a gradual yet consistent strengthening of deterrence vis-à-vis the Russian Federation. Official Berlin consistently communicated to Stockholm its evolving position on Sweden’s abandonment of its policy of conditional neutrality, emphasising the value it attached to their relationship of trust. In the late 2010s and the first half of the 2020s, direct bilateral contacts between the heads of government of Germany and Sweden took place frequently, at least once a year.

The two countries also cooperated within the framework of the EU, including in the implementation of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (since 2009). In this context, Germany and Sweden worked together within the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS, established in 1992). At the initial stage of the

¹ Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan (2015—2021), 2022, *NATO*, 30.05.2022, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_113694.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Antrag der Bundesregierung, 2021, *Deutscher Bundestag*, 19. Wahlperiode, Drucksache 19/28803, 21.04.2021, S. 9.

³ NATO and Libya, 2011, *NATO*, February—October 2011, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_71652.htm (accessed 19.11.2025).

confrontation, the activities of the CBSS were suspended. Sweden supported Germany's efforts to restore the format in 2017, but in a manner that transformed it into a platform for articulating a coordinated position of the Western democracies, while reducing Russia's role within the CBSS to a largely nominal one.¹ The culmination was the call on March 3, 2022, to suspend Russia's participation in the Council², an attempt to use its platform to promote decisions aimed at turning the Baltic Sea into an "internal lake" for NATO. Not accepting this approach, Russia withdrew from the CBSS in May 2022.

Coordination between the two countries was even more pronounced within the N3+1 and N5+1 formats. The "+1" referred to Germany, while also underscoring its special role within each negotiating platform, whereas the first component of the designation indicated the number of participating Northern European states: three (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden) or all five.

The author considers Sweden's (non-)aligned status to be the key factor shaping the format in which Germany preferred to conduct negotiations, involving either a limited group or the full set of regional actors.

The N3+1 negotiating format operated at a high level, at the level of foreign ministers, though not at the level of heads of government. The participating Northern European states were EU members; among them, only Denmark was also a member of NATO at the time the format was in operation. This configuration reflected Germany's intention to engage primarily with the then non-aligned Finland and Sweden. The first meeting was held in Copenhagen in December 2014.³ Preparing the launch of N3+1, Germany placed particular emphasis on cooperation with Sweden⁴. Earlier, on 5 September 2014, Sweden, together with Finland, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Alliance on an enhanced strategic partnership at the NATO Wales Summit [20]. At the same time, Sweden decided to participate in the training activities of the NATO Response Force (NRF). The NRF was designed for the rapid deployment of forces from the depth of the Alliance's area of responsibility to its most critical forward areas, enabling a swift shift in the balance of power. From 2014 until its reorganisation in 2023, Germany made the largest contribution to the NATO Response Force. The Federal Republic of Germany served as the principal provider of the land component of the NRF on three occasions, each for a one-

¹ Vertrauen durch Dialog: Gabriel will Ostseerat wiederbeleben, 2017, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 21.06.2017, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/zusammenarbeit-staaten/ostseekooperation/170621-bm-ostseerat/290796> (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Ostseekooperation. 2022, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 16.03.2022, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/zusammenarbeit-staaten/ostseekooperation/-/210006> (accessed 19.11.2025).

³ Enge Beratungen im neuen „N3+1“-Format, 2014, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 01.12.2014, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/daenemark-node/141201-n3-1-kopenhagen/267302> (accessed 19.11.2025).

⁴ Außenminister Steinmeier trifft schwedische Außenministerin, 2014, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 04.11.2014, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/141104-am-schweden/266636> (accessed 19.11.2025).

year period (2015, 2019, and 2023) [29]. This development was associated with a noticeable increase in both the scale and the quality of practical cooperation between Germany and Sweden under NATO auspices.

However, this did not imply that, in the mid-2010s, Germany was actively encouraging Sweden to join NATO *de jure*. The primary objective of the N3+1 format was Germany's effort to persuade its partner that its key security and defence concerns could be addressed within the framework of the EU, without the need to abandon its policy of non-alignment in the near term. At the initial stage of the confrontation with Russia, Berlin regarded such a scenario as carrying the risk of uncontrolled escalation. The fact and substance of the N3+1 meetings in December 2014 and November 2016 are illustrative¹, as is Germany's decision to refrain from deploying a Bundeswehr contingent to participate in the Swedish Armed Forces' largest national exercise, Aurora 17 (September 2017). At the same time, the Bundeswehr made a substantial and operationally significant contribution to the NATO exercise Trident Juncture 18 (October–November 2018) in Norway [12].

However, positions that Germany had considered unacceptable in the mid-2010s came to be regarded as possible in the late 2010s, realistic at the turn of the decade, and necessary in the early 2020s. An illustrative example is the evolution of Germany's approach to deploying a military presence in the region, which created an evident security challenge for the Kaliningrad region and the broader north-west of the Russian Federation, as well as for its ally Belarus [30; 31].

In 2014, the FRG refrained from active participation in military training activities in the Baltic States. From January 2017, however, Germany assumed the role of framework nation for the NATO multinational battlegroup in Lithuania, with rotating Bundeswehr contingents. By February 2022, Germany had already expanded its contribution, and in June 2022, Berlin announced its decision to gradually upgrade this formation to brigade level. In November 2023, it was decided that the brigade would be stationed on a permanent basis, would consist predominantly of German personnel, and would be designated under Bundeswehr command (the 45th Armoured Brigade). The existing multinational battlegroup remained an integral component of this formation [15].

North of the Baltic Sea, Germany's approach evolved in a manner similar to that observed in the southern part of the region. In March 2019, the third round of N3+1 talks was held in Helsinki. The participants demonstrated solidarity in containing not only the Russian Federation but also China, and jointly rejected pressure on the EU exerted by the first Trump administration.² The negotiating

¹ Außenminister Steinmeier lädt Außenminister Dänemarks, Finnlands und Schwedens nach Berlin ein, 2016, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 07.11.2016, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/161107-bm-dk-fin-swe/284942> (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Europe United: International geschlossen auftreten, 2019, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 19.03.2019, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/zusammenarbeitstaaten/maas-aussenpolitik-europa-daenemark-schweden-finnland-/2200644> (accessed 19.11.2025).

agenda demonstrated the trusting relationship between Germany and its trio of Nordic partners, particularly Sweden. The third meeting in the N3+1 format proved to be the final one.

In August 2019, the N5+1 format convened for the first time at the highest level¹ and in October 2019, at the level of foreign ministers.² The de facto replacement of one platform with another demonstrated not only the general strengthening of Germany's position in the region, but also the fact that it ceased to differentiate contacts with regional players based on their membership in the EU and NATO. This indirectly indicated that the FRG was beginning to view Stockholm's entry into the Alliance as acceptable.

Readiness for joining the Alliance gradually increased and began to be openly articulated in the spring of 2022, with the launch of the special military operation serving as the immediate catalyst. By that time, governments led by Social Democrats were in power in both countries. In Germany, this was the "grand coalition" under Olaf Scholz (with the participation of the CDU/CSU), while in Sweden it was the cabinet of Magdalena Andersson. The first talks between the two leaders took place in Berlin on 28 March 2022. In their public statements, they did not explicitly raise the issue of Sweden's abandonment of its policy of non-alignment. However, the Chancellor noted, "We [Germany] have obligations to our NATO partners. There is a very specific clause on mutual assistance, but also, of course, to all the others with whom we are part of the EU."³ Accordingly, Olaf Scholz viewed cooperation in the field of security and defence under the auspices of the European Union as necessary but insufficient, demonstrating the advantage of simultaneous membership in NATO.

Olaf Scholz held his next meeting with Margaret Andersson on May 3, 2022, at his residence in Meseberg. The Chancellor emphasised that Germany viewed Sweden (and Finland) as close partners and closely followed the discussions on joining NATO.⁴ With this statement, Scholz acknowledged that Stockholm had consistently signalled its readiness to fully abandon its policy of non-alignment,

¹ Bundeskanzlerin besucht Island, 2019, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 20.08.2019, URL: <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/merkel-in-island-1661974> (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Maas und die Nordics: Gemeinsam den Multilateralismus stärken, 2019, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 17.10.2019, URL: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/europa/maas-nordische-botschaften/2258252> (accessed 19.11.2025).

³ Pressekonferenz von Bundeskanzler Scholz und der Ministerpräsidentin des Königreichs Schweden Andersson zu ihrem Besuch in Berlin am 28. März 2022, 2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 28.03.2022, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressekonferenz-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-und-der-ministerpraesidentin-des-koenigreichs-schweden-andersson-zu-ihrem-besuch-in-berlin-am-28-maerz-2022-2021168> (accessed 19.11.2025).

⁴ Pressestatements von Bundeskanzler Scholz, der finnischen Ministerpräsidentin Marin und der schwedischen Ministerpräsidentin Andersson am 3. Mai 2022 in Schloss Meseberg, 2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 03.05.2022, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-der-finnischen-ministerpraesidentin-marin-und-der-schwedischen-ministerpraesidentin-andersson-am-3-mai-2022-in-schloss-meseberg-2030188> (accessed 19.11.2025).

a move supported by Germany. Both key meetings took place in Germany, rather than alternating between the two countries. This reflects Germany's role as the senior partner in the dialogue, in many respects acting as a facilitator for its formerly conditionally neutral partner in the process of integration into NATO. Sweden and Finland officially submitted their applications to join the Alliance on May 18, 2025.¹ On the eve, Germany published a national statement of support for the actions of these two Scandinavian states, calling their decisions sovereign.²

Germany was among the first NATO countries to ratify its accession and began to demonstrate solidarity with Sweden in every possible way, even as Turkey and Hungary spoke out against Sweden's early entry into the Alliance [21; 22]. For the liberal establishments in Germany and Sweden, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán were regarded as ideological opponents within the Western community.

On 15 August 2022, the second round of N5 +1 talks at the highest level was held in Norway. The convening of this meeting, its agenda, centred on expressing support for Sweden amid delays in its accession to NATO, and the bilateral talks between Olaf Scholz and Magdalena Andersson held the following day in Stockholm all point in the same direction. Taken together, these developments indicate Germany's heightened attention to Sweden and suggest that one of the principal objectives of the N5 +1 format, which replaced N3 +1 in 2019, was to facilitate Stockholm's decision to abandon its policy of non-alignment.

Despite the high frequency of face-to-face meetings at the highest level, the heads of government of Germany and Sweden discussed the explosion of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline on September 26, 2022, only in a video conference format together with the prime ministers of Denmark, Norway and the NATO Secretary General. This attack was recognised as a terrorist one, but remained a peripheral issue in the interstate dialogue.

The change of government in Sweden did not adversely affect its dialogue with Germany. Following the Riksdag elections, the Moderate Coalition Party, led by Ulf Kristersson, took office in October 2022. At bilateral talks held in Berlin in March 2023, the Chancellor reaffirmed Germany's continued support for Sweden's accession to NATO. Scholz and Kristersson also coordinated efforts to supply military equipment to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, particularly tanks and air defence systems, and discussed further measures to advance EU integration for Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Western Balkan countries. The substance of these discussions reflected Germany's confidence in Sweden's accession to the Alliance, as well as the importance it attached to intensifying efforts to extend the EU's influence in the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav regions.

¹ Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO, 2022, *NATO*, 18.05.2022, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Nationale Erklärung Deutschlands zum NATO-Beitrittsbegehren Finnlands und Schwedens, 2022, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 17.05.2022, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/nationale-erklaerung-deutschlands-zum-nato-beitrittsbegehren-finnlands-und-schwedens-2040396> (accessed 19.11.2025).

By the spring of 2024, Turkey and Hungary had withdrawn their objections, and on 7 March, Sweden officially joined NATO. Just two months later, in May 2024, the third N5+1 meeting at the highest level was held in Stockholm.¹ Meetings in this format were held shortly after Sweden's application to join NATO and again following the completion of its accession, rather than during the intervening period, which further confirms the functional focus of the N5+1. As in August 2022, the six-party meeting was followed the next day by bilateral German—Swedish talks, underscoring the high level of trust in the dialogue and Sweden's importance in Germany's strategic planning. At the same time, Germany remained Sweden's largest trading partner.

The May 2024 negotiations focused less on Sweden's accession itself and more on coordinating concrete measures of cooperation in the new strategic context, particularly with a view to turning the Baltic Sea into an "internal lake" of the Alliance. This agenda, including coordination related to the launch of the new NATO mission Baltic Sentry, was further elaborated at the highest-level talks in January 2025 [32]. The parties also continued to align their positions on support for Ukraine and on the further strengthening of deterrence vis-à-vis Russia.²

These priorities remained unchanged under the Friedrich Merz government (CDU/CSU and SPD), which was formed on 6 May 2025 following the Bundestag elections in February. Just three weeks after taking office, Merz held talks in the N5+1 format (this time in Finland)³. This confirmed the importance of the Northern European dimension in German foreign policy. Cooperation with Sweden has acquired particular significance for Germany. Sweden has been rapidly increasing not only its defence spending but also the size of its armed forces, making it the only regional actor to pursue both trends simultaneously.

Germany and Sweden's approaches to increasing their military power

The militarisation strategies of Berlin and Stockholm are fundamentally similar, although they differ in certain tactical aspects. Each country has traditionally drawn on the other's experience in military force development. Until the early 2020s, this dynamic was primarily one-sided, with Sweden learning from Germany [16]. Subsequently, however, the reverse pattern became evident: faced with persistent constraints on expanding the Bundeswehr, Germany began to draw lessons from Sweden's substantial increase in troop numbers following the reintroduction of conscription in 2017.

¹ Mehr als nur Nachbarn, 2024, Bundeskanzleramt, 13.05.2024, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/kanzler-nordischer-rat-stockholm-2281682> (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Infrastruktur schützen, Ukraine unterstützen, 2025, Bundeskanzleramt, 17.01.2025, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/archiv-bundesregierung/bk-kristersson-2330794> (accessed 19.11.2025).

³ Partnerschaft zwischen Deutschland und „Nordic 5“ richtungweisend für EU, 2025, Bundeskanzleramt, 27.05.2025, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/pk-merz-finnland-2350434> (accessed 19.11.2025).

Neither country possesses nuclear weapons; consequently, their armed forces are entirely conventional. Over the quarter century following the end of the Cold War, both Germany and Sweden consistently reduced their force levels. By the mid-2010s, their armed forces were relatively compact and structurally balanced. Both countries have traditionally maintained strong air and naval forces, equipped largely with domestically designed and produced aircraft and vessels, while their land forces were reduced to a minimum. As a result, both the Bundeswehr and the Swedish Armed Forces faced the risk of a critical erosion of combat capability [33].

This problem became particularly evident in the context of the growing military commitments assumed by Berlin and Stockholm as confrontation with Russia intensified. By the late 2010s, both states had already recognised the need to significantly expand their land forces. Since the early 1990s, the army had been the primary target of reductions in both the German and Swedish armed forces.

From the early 2020s onwards, the imperative of a rapid, large-scale rebuild of land capabilities became even more pronounced. Developments in the special military operation underscored the continuing centrality of land forces in modern warfare, even as their technological profile has evolved significantly. Accordingly, for both Germany and Sweden, plans and measures to expand land force structures have become a key indicator of their broader militarisation strategies.

Despite the evident disparity in the overall size of their armed forces, Germany and Sweden occupied broadly comparable positions relative to other major European NATO and EU states. In Germany's case, the relevant comparators are the largest countries — the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Poland. For Sweden, the reference group comprises the other Northern European states (Denmark, Norway, and Finland; Iceland is excluded, as it does not maintain standing armed forces).

In 2014, the Bundeswehr had a smaller personnel strength than the armed forces of France and Italy, but exceeded that of the United Kingdom, as shown in Table 1. At the same time, in terms of population (81.7 million), Germany significantly outpaced each of these countries (66.5 million, 60.2 million, and 65.1 million, respectively).

Table 1

**Military personnel in major European NATO countries,
2014–2024, thousands**

State	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024*
UK	168,7	141,4	139,5	149,4	146,6	144,0	147,3	148,2	143,6	138,1	138,1
Germany	178,8	177,2	177,9	179,8	181,5	183,8	183,9	183,9	183,2	181,7	185,6
Italy	183,5	178,4	176,3	174,6	174,1	176,4	173,4	170,3	170,0	170,7	171,4
Poland	99,0	98,9	101,6	105,3	109,5	113,1	116,2	166,8	176,0	206,5	216,1
France	207,0	204,8	208,1	208,2	208,2	207,8	207,6	207,6	207,1	205,3	204,7

The source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014–2024), 2025, Brussels, NATO, p. 13.

Note: * data for 2024 are preliminary.

As shown in Table 2, the Swedish Armed Forces were smaller than those of Denmark, Norway, and Finland, with Finland's armed forces being more than twice as large. At the same time, in terms of population, Sweden (9.8 million) significantly exceeded the other Northern European countries (5.7 million, 5.2 million, and 5.5 million, respectively).

Table 2

The number of armed forces of the Northern European states, thousands

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024*	2025*
Denmark	16,9	17,2	17,3	16,7	17,1	16,3	16,9	16,9	16,7	17,3	17,3	17,3
Norway	21,0	20,9	20,5	20,2	20,2	19,2	20,6	23,1	23,5	24,0	24,3	24,8
Finland	32,5	31,0	31,3	31,0	31,8	31,1	31,3	31,1	30,5	31,0	30,8	30,8
Sweden	14,7	15,0	15,0	15,9	17,8	19,1	20,1	21,1	20,9	21,5	23,1	24,9

The source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014–2024), 2025, Brussels, NATO, p. 13.

Note: * data for 2024 and 2025 are preliminary.

However, despite this lagging position, Germany and Sweden have outlined very ambitious plans to increase the size of their armed forces. Since June 2022, the top leadership of Germany — first Chancellor Olaf Scholz and then Friedrich Merz¹ — have consistently declared the goal of transforming the Bundeswehr into the largest conventional armed forces among the European NATO member states. The Bundeswehr should grow to at least 260 thousand active-duty personnel and 200 thousand reservists in the medium term.² Between 2014 and 2023, the size of the Bundeswehr fluctuated, recording both increases and decreases, but overall grew only marginally, by approximately 2%, as shown in Table 1. From 2024 onwards, the German Ministry of Defence has declared a transition to sustained growth. The key issue, however, concerns the pace of expansion. To recruit an additional 80,000 personnel by the mid-2030s, Berlin has been exploring options for reinstating compulsory military service. Since 2011, conscription has not been formally abolished, but has remained suspended in practice. Its reintroduction is intended not only to increase overall force levels and the reserve component but also to expand the pool of potential professional recruits.

By 2025, in terms of active-duty personnel, Germany had already surpassed both the United Kingdom, which was experiencing a marked reduction in force levels, and Italy, where the decline was more gradual. The French armed forces,

¹ Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzler Friedrich Merz, 2025, *Bundeskanzleramt*, 14.05.2025, URL: <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/regierungserklaerung-von-bundeskanzler-friedrich-merz-2347888> (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Eckpunkte für neuen Wehrdienst: Sechs Monate Dienstzeit, 260.000 Aktive, 2025, *Augengeradeaus*, 04.07.2025, URL: <https://augengeradeaus.net/2025/07/eckpunkte-fuer-neuen-wehrdienst-sechs-monate-dienstzeit-260-000-aktive/> (accessed 19.11.2025).

by contrast, remained broadly stable in size (see Table 1). The Bundeswehr, particularly in the event of the reintroduction of conscription, has the potential to exceed these levels.

At the same time, this objective is considerably more difficult to achieve in relation to Poland, whose armed forces have outpaced Germany in both the rate of force expansion and interim force levels. The target force size announced by Poland, up to 300,000 personnel [9, p. 64–66], exceeds Germany's stated objectives. However, this figure is likely to include reservists undergoing short-term training. Germany has likewise begun to reinstate this practice. Germany's stated objective of maintaining one of the largest force structures among NATO member states, ranking third after the United States and Turkey, reflects its broader leadership ambitions, particularly within the European pillar of the Alliance.

Sweden pursues comparable ambitions, albeit at the regional level, specifically in Northern Europe. Unlike Berlin, Stockholm has not set explicit end-state force targets. At the same time, a further expansion of conscription intake is planned, from 7,000 personnel in 2023 to 10,000 by 2030 and 12,000 by 2032.¹ This trajectory is expected to raise Swedish active-duty strength to at least 27,000 personnel by the early 2030s, based on the data in Table 2, with total force levels projected to reach 30,000–35,000 by the end of the decade. By the mid-2020s, the Swedish Armed Forces had already surpassed those of Denmark, where force levels remained stable, and Norway, where a modest reduction was followed by only limited recovery. Over the longer term, Sweden may also surpass Finland, whose force levels have shown little change since its accession to NATO (see Table 2).

The reintroduction of conscription in 2017 enabled Stockholm to establish new military formations, primarily within the ground forces and closely related supporting units. Sweden has already increased the garrison on Gotland since 2018,² established two new infantry regiments and an additional amphibious regiment in 2021–January 2022.³ In 2025, the Swedish army already formed its first subarctic mechanised brigade in the 19th Norrbotten Regiment.⁴ In practice, Germany moved along this path noticeably more slowly.

Plans to deploy what is effectively the first new brigade of the Bundeswehr, the 45th Tank Brigade based in Lithuania, were announced in June 2022 and elaborated in November 2023. Formally established in April 2025, the brigade is expected to be fully staffed by 2027, with personnel drawn primarily from

¹ Försvarutskottets betänkande 2024/25. Totalförsvaret 2025–2030, 2024, Stockholm, *Riksdag*, s. 38.

² Gotland regiment, 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/gotland-regiment-p-18/> (accessed 19.11.2025).

³ Dalarna Regiment (I 13), 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/dalarna-regiment-i-13/> (accessed 19.11.2025).

⁴ Norrbotten Regiment (I 19), 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/norrbotten-regiment-i-19/> (accessed 19.11.2025).

existing battalions and redistributed across other brigades.¹ The Bundeswehr did not field its first newly established battalion until October 2025, and this was an artillery unit rather than an armoured or mechanised infantry formation. Consequently, Germany's efforts in this area lagged seven years behind those of Sweden.

With regard to recruiting additional personnel, Germany, as a long-standing member of NATO, has been slower to respond than Sweden, which maintained a policy of non-alignment until 2024. This difference is commonly attributed to Sweden's reliance on its own capabilities, reflected in its adherence to the concept of 'total defence'.

The two countries have followed broadly similar trajectories in the growth of defence expenditure. Berlin began to increase spending sharply in 2020, while Stockholm did so in 2021 (see Table 3), meaning that both countries increased their military spending prior to the start of the special military operation (SMO). By 2025, Germany had become the leading European member of NATO in absolute defence expenditure, approaching 100 billion US dollars (В какой валюте? Точно миллиард? миллиардов долларов США) and reaching 2 % of GDP. In turn, Sweden had surpassed all other Northern European countries in absolute military spending by 2024 and, in relative terms, had significantly exceeded the 2 % threshold (over 2.3 %). Both countries have expressed confidence in their ability to reach the 3.5 % target by 2030, in line with decisions adopted at the NATO Summit 2025.

Table 3

Military expenditures of Germany and Sweden, million dollars

State	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024*
Germany	46 176	39 833	41 606	45 470	49 772	52 549	58 652	62 054	61 045	73 138	93 747
Sweden	6 205	5 103	5 017	5 229	5 396	5 560	5 984	9 071	8 562	9 849	13 967

The source: Defence expenditures of NATO countries (2014–2024), 2025, Brussels, NATO, p. 8.

Note: * data for 2024 are preliminary.

Armed Forces Cooperation: NATO's Forward Presence in the Scandinavian-Baltic region

Like Sweden, Germany has sought to play an active role in the manning of NATO's multinational formations in the mid-2020s and has fully supported an approach emphasising the deployment of ground forces. Most of these formations have been multinational, at least de jure, and have gradually acquired a joint

¹ Die Bundeswehr hat eine neue Brigade, 2025, *Bundeswehr*, 01.04.2025, URL: <https://www.bundeswehr.de/de/organisation/heer/aktuelles/deutsche-panzerbrigade-45-litauen-indienststellung-5927738> (accessed 19.11.2025).

character, with units from other service branches, primarily special forces and unmanned aerial systems, being integrated into their structure. Accordingly, since the early 2020s, the core of the Alliance's Forward Presence has been understood to consist of the Forward Land Forces (FLF).¹ The key element of the NATO Response Force was the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF). The land component has remained central within the Allied Reaction Force (ARF), which replaced the NRF on 1 July 2024 and is regarded as significantly more mobile [2, p. 3–4]. The ARF is also intended to deploy rapidly from the depth of its area of responsibility to priority areas along its eastern flank.

Germany has sought to increase its contribution to the manning of the full range of the aforementioned NATO force groupings, whereas Sweden has focused primarily on participation in the Alliance's Forward Presence formations. This divergence is largely explained by differences in the size of their armed forces. The Bundeswehr is nearly an order of magnitude larger, and this gap is expected to persist for the foreseeable future (with planned active personnel figures of approximately 260,000 and 35,000, respectively).

Under contemporary conditions, neither state bordered the Alliance's area of responsibility, and both could therefore potentially play an active role in the NATO Response Force and the Allied Reaction Force. Stockholm demonstrated interest in participation from the onset of confrontation with the Russian Federation in 2014 until its accession to the Alliance in 2024. This appears to reflect the fact that the principles governing the manning of NATO Forward Presence did not envisage extensive participation by partner states, that is, countries not formally part of the Alliance. By contrast, such participation was possible within the framework of the NATO Response Force.

After joining NATO, Stockholm set its priorities differently. The new key priority is to send significant contingents to the multilateral FLF formations, specifically those located in the territories that were part of Sweden during the era of its greatest prosperity (1611–1721). As early as January 2025, Sweden deployed a tank battalion to the NATO battlegroup in Latvia, which was being expanded to brigade level, with Canada serving as the “framework” nation.²

Sweden has expressed its willingness to assume a similar role for a multinational NATO formation scheduled to be established in Lapland in 2026. The core of the brigade, composed primarily of Swedish units, is expected to be stationed there [34]. Key measures to expand the Swedish Army are aimed at fulfilling these commitments. By 2026, a sub-arctic tank brigade had been established on the basis of the Norrbotten Regiment, which is intended to form the nucleus of the Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Lapland.³ It represents the vanguard, behind which, in Sweden itself, it is planned to deploy another subarctic Tank Brigade

¹ Strengthening NATO's eastern flank, 2025, NATO, URL: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm (accessed 19.11.2025).

² Historic Swedish force arrives in Latvia, 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, 18.01.2025, URL: <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/news/2025/01/historic-swedish-force-arrives-in-latvia/> (accessed 19.11.2025).

³ Norrbotten Regiment (I 19), 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/norrbotten-regiment-i-19/> (accessed 19.11.2025).

(apparently based on the 4th Tank Regiment, which is permanently stationed in the south of the country) and a regiment of mountain rangers (Norrland).¹ The 7th South Skåne Tank Regiment has also begun to be reorganised into a brigade. This unit is responsible for providing a rotational contribution to the NATO multinational battlegroup south of Riga. This multinational formation is expected to operate in coordination with Swedish forces in southern mainland Sweden, namely the remaining elements of the 7th Tank Brigade² and especially on Gotland Island (a battle group based on the 18th Tank Regiment).³ In total, Sweden deployed three brigades and one battlegroup (an understrength brigade), amounting to four formations, all of them heavy in equipment.⁴ Each of these formations is intended to contribute to or reinforce NATO's Forward Presence. A limited number of regiments, predominantly light formations, remain outside this framework, although some may be designated for future contribution to the Allied Reaction Force.

To man the NATO Response Force, and subsequently the Allied Reaction Force, Germany allocated a full division, the 1st Tank Division, comprising three heavy brigades, as early as the beginning of the 2020s. A further division, the 10th Tank Division, comprising approximately two and a half brigades, was designated for the operational reinforcement of the Alliance's Forward Presence within NATO's area of responsibility. This division also includes the 45th Tank Brigade of the Bundeswehr, deployed in Lithuania as a Forward Land Forces (FLF) formation.

The underlying concept is comparable to that employed by Sweden for its NATO formation in Lapland. Notably, within NATO's Forward Presence, only two states have established their own brigades as de jure multinational FLF battlegroups: Germany and Sweden. In this context, it is reasonable to suggest that the Swedish Armed Forces drew on the German model, implemented in Lithuania, when shaping the configuration of its ground presence in northern Finland.

By reserving substantial forces for the potential reinforcement of this forward-deployed brigade, a formation centred on the 4th Tank Regiment, an Arctic mountain infantry unit, Sweden appears to have adopted operational patterns similar to those of Germany, where the 10th Tank Division serves as the principal reinforcement for the 45th Tank Brigade. This reflects a high level of bilateral coordination in aligning national force postures with the requirements of NATO's Forward Presence and the operational framework governing the FLF.

¹ Försvarsutskottets betänkande 2024/25. Totalförsvaret 2025—2030, 2025, Stockholm, *Riksdag*, s. 38, URL: https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/beTankande/totalforsvaret-2025-2030_hc01f%C3%B6u2/html/ (accessed 19.11.2025).

² South Skåne Regiment, 2025, *Försvarsmakten*, URL: <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/about/organisation/training-units-schools-and-centres/south-skane-regiment-p-7/> (accessed 19.11.2025).

³ Krigsorganisationens utveckling 2025—2035, 2025, Stockholm: *Försvarsmakten*, 05.06.2024, s. 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Given the vast expanse of the Scandinavian—Baltic region, Germany and Sweden have geographically distributed responsibilities for the employment of their ground forces in a manner that is mutually complementary. Sweden has assumed responsibilities along two axes in the central sector: northern Finland (where no multinational NATO formations were deployed in the south of the country) and Latvia. Germany, by contrast, has concentrated its efforts on the flanks, primarily in Lithuania. In addition, a contingent of the Bundeswehr has actively participated in Alliance exercises in the Arctic regions of Norway [12].

German—Swedish military cooperation is particularly evident in relation to the projection of pressure on the Kaliningrad region, an exclave of Russia [34], as well as on Belarus as a Russian ally [31]. Forces deployed in southern mainland Sweden, primarily the main brigade elements based on the 7th Tank Regiment, on Gotland, where a battlegroup is formed around the 18th Tank Regiment, and the Forward Land Forces (FLF) formation in Latvia, which includes a Swedish contingent, together form a coherent network of formations with the 45th Tank Brigade of the Bundeswehr. This brigade is deployed in proximity to the Suwalki Corridor.¹

It is noteworthy that almost all of these troop formations, deployed on Gotland and in the territories of the two Baltic States, are located to the east of the Kaliningrad region, which may render their presence particularly sensitive from the perspective of the security of the Russian Federation. These units are likely to assume an increased role in the event of attempts to restrict access to this region.

Germany and Sweden have strengthened cooperation across the land, maritime, and air domains. The 1st Standing NATO Maritime Group (SNMG1) and the 1st Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group (SNMCMG1) have operated in the Baltic Sea and adjacent waters, with their composition maintained on a rotational basis. Since their establishment, Germany has been a consistent contributor to both formations, deploying vessels from the 1st Corvette Squadron and the 3rd Mine Countermeasures Squadron. Sweden, in turn, has contributed ships primarily from its 3rd and 4th Naval Flotillas, which have a mixed composition of corvettes and mine countermeasures vessels.

Since 2025, German—Swedish naval cooperation has developed along a third track, in addition to joint participation in SNMG1 and SNMCMG1, in connection with the launch of the Baltic Sentry mission [32]. This mission has included not only surface vessels but also submarines, thereby enabling bilateral cooperation between the 1st Submarine Squadron of the Bundeswehr and the 1st Submarine Flotilla of the Swedish Navy.

The annual BALTOPS exercises have played a significant role in enhancing overall interoperability between the navies of the two countries, including marine units and naval aviation. Sweden began participating in these exercises well before 2024 as a partner of NATO.

Germany deployed fighter aircraft to the Baltic Air Policing mission. Sweden likewise joined its rotational contributions upon accession to NATO.

¹ A narrow strip of land located along the border between Poland and Lithuania, which separates the Kaliningrad region and Belarus

Another dimension of cooperation between the armed forces of Germany and Sweden has been the coordinated deployment of military instructors to train personnel of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, alongside the supply of various categories of military equipment to Ukraine. A key element of this cooperation has been the provision of Leopard 2A6 tanks by the Bundeswehr and their Swedish-modified variant, the Strv 122. Each country played a decisive role in training specific formations of the Ukrainian Armed Forces: Germany in the case of the 47th Mechanised Brigade, and Sweden in that of the 21st Brigade. Both formations were regarded as elite and played a significant role in Ukrainian offensive operations; however, by 2025, their combat potential had been noticeably degraded, despite repeated replenishment of personnel and equipment.

* * *

Relations between Germany and Sweden are notable for the near absence of large-scale military conflict, including during the period of Prussian statehood. As a result, considerations of Berlin's historical responsibility towards Stockholm have largely been absent, which has had a noticeable impact on bilateral cooperation, particularly in the context of their parallel trajectories of militarisation.

Sweden's deepening cooperation with NATO, culminating in its accession to the Alliance a decade after the onset of confrontation between the West and Russia, has broadly aligned with Germany's gradual, consistent approach to deterrence. In this context, Germany has closely coordinated its strategic planning and practical measures with Sweden, as reflected in the N3+1 format (2014–2019), the subsequent N5+1 platform, and intensive highest-level bilateral contacts.

Taken together, these mechanisms have been sufficient to address the expanding range of issues in security and defence in a timely and effective manner. This is one of the reasons why the establishment of a formal intergovernmental consultation format appears unlikely in the foreseeable future. Another consideration is that such a step could be interpreted as *de facto* recognition by Germany of Sweden as the leading political actor in Northern Europe. This, in turn, could undermine Berlin's close relationship with Norway, which is of particular strategic importance given its geographical position, enabling European NATO members to project their presence into the Arctic from Norwegian territory.

At the same time, Berlin continues to view Stockholm as a key regional military contributor to the Alliance's activities.

Overall, Germany and Sweden have increasingly aligned their efforts in distributing the burden of manning NATO's multinational formations, particularly in the Scandinavian–Baltic region. This reflects both the scale of the tasks associated with the deterrence of Russia and the limited resources of the two states, especially in terms of personnel, as well as the high level of mutual trust between them. An additional factor is the shared intention to maximise the effectiveness of joint efforts to ensure a greater European role in the emerging international order.

The nature of current and planned military cooperation makes it possible to speak of mutual support for Sweden's efforts to become the principal contributor to the Alliance's formations in its immediate region, and for Germany's ambition to assume a leading role across Europe by demonstrating military capability.

The efforts of Germany and Sweden have contributed to the accelerated and large-scale Europeanisation of NATO's force structure, both in terms of personnel and financial commitments. On this issue, the positions of political elites in Berlin and Stockholm, broadly aligned with liberal democratic principles, have coincided with those of the Trump administration, despite broader ideological differences. Notably, during his second presidency, since January 2025, Donald Trump has expressed significantly less criticism of the Federal Republic of Germany than during his first term [36].

Cooperation between Germany and Sweden, which are not only actively pursuing a course of militarisation but are also combining it with a desire to further intensify deterrence vis-à-vis Russia, poses serious challenges to the security and defence of the northern and north-western regions of the Russian Federation. Of particular concern is cooperation between the Bundeswehr and Swedish forces in implementing, under the auspices of NATO, measures that could lead to attempts to restrict access to the Kaliningrad region and create the perception that the Baltic Sea constitutes an "internal lake" for the Alliance.

From Russia's perspective, it is appropriate to demonstrate continued resolve to prevent such a scenario, primarily through asymmetric means. In this context, particular importance is given to emphasising the ongoing technological modernisation of delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction and the readiness to employ them in the event of a threat to Russia's vital interests.

It is unlikely that a settlement of the Ukrainian conflict would lead European "liberal democracies" to significantly soften their approaches to deterrence of the Russian Federation or to agree to a partial reduction of NATO's forward presence. In such circumstances, a positive outcome could be the restoration of multilateral diplomatic coordination aimed at preventing the escalation of unintended incidents into a full-scale military conflict. The implementation of such measures in the Scandinavian—Baltic region would depend on the willingness of the foreign ministries of Germany and Sweden to engage in such efforts.

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