

Sweden edges closer to NATO membership

Parliament voted in favor of the NATO option — allowing the country to join the alliance in future.



In August, Sweden deployed troops to its Baltic island of Gotland following a security scare triggered by Russian warships | Tom Little/AFP via Getty Images

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STOCKHOLM — Sweden is rethinking its security, and whether it really is safest outside NATO.

Two years out from the next election, debate over whether to join the Western defense alliance is intensifying, setting up a left-versus-right clash on the question in 2022.

The current minority government of Social Democrats and Greens — plus their allies the Left Party — remain staunchly against, citing the value of neutrality in what they see as a polarizing world.

On the other side, four traditionally allied center-right parties — the Moderate Party, the Liberals, the Center Party and the Christian Democrats — are in favor, saying Sweden needs the security of the defense guarantees that NATO membership offers.

The pro-NATO side scored a big win last week when the far-right Sweden Democrats, who are angling for closer cooperation with the center-right bloc in a range of policy areas, reversed a previous anti-NATO stance and backed a motion for Sweden to adopt a so-called NATO option — allowing it to join NATO at some point in the future. Parliament voted in favor of the motion by 204 votes to 145.

“Issues of defense don’t normally sit high on the agenda in elections here, but since the Sweden Democrats have now moved their position, we could well see more interest,” said Allan Widman, a lawmaker with the Liberal Party and spokesman on defense policy.

Adopting a “NATO option” is not a commitment to join — Finland has had such an option since 1995 and remains outside the pact — but is widely seen as a movement in that direction. The government has acknowledged as much by so far refusing to act on it.

Foreign Minister Ann Linde called parliamentary backing for the move “a significant negative event for Swedish security.”

For Sweden, joining NATO would be a big policy shift, as it would end more than 200 years of official military neutrality. The country has not formally taken sides in a war since Napoleon was advancing across Europe, and has over recent years sought to carve out a diplomatic role as an impartial international arbiter while at the same time developing a closer partnership with NATO.

Swedish NATO membership would also shake up a delicate balance of power in the volatile Baltic Sea region, where officially unaligned Sweden and Finland and NATO members Denmark, Germany, Poland and the Baltic states regularly face off against Russia.

In August, Sweden deployed troops to its Baltic island of Gotland after a security scare triggered by Russian warships sailing close to the island.

Russian military jets regularly enter Swedish airspace without permission and many pointed the finger at Russia when a mysterious submarine was detected in waters close to the capital Stockholm in 2014.

Analysts say that last week's vote in the Swedish parliament on the NATO option likely signals the start of a new phase in the wrangling over full entry into the alliance.

"We can now expect a more comprehensive political debate about an eventual Swedish membership," Calle Håkansson, an analyst at the think tank the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, told public service television.

The arguments of both sides are already clear. The Social Democrats' resistance is based on a long-held belief that Sweden's "freedom from alliances," as the party calls it, has served the country well.

Defense Minister Peter Hultqvist has engineered a range of joint training exercises with NATO, such as the cold weather exercise Northern Wind in Sweden in March 2019, but at every turn, he has sought to underline Swedish independence.

The Social Democrats say that joining NATO would represent unnecessary antagonization of Russia, and risk destabilizing an already tense security situation along Europe's eastern flank.

"We don't want to go down a road of security policy experiments or adventurism," Hultqvist wrote in an editorial in August.

Meanwhile, Widman, of the pro-NATO Liberals, said Sweden's strategy has left it in a security "no-man's land," viewed by Russia as part of the "European security system" but lacking the guarantee of the NATO members' commitment to mutual defense.

"That is a very dangerous position to find yourself in," he said.

While public support for NATO membership in Finland has remained low and steady, in Sweden it has been rising.

Research by Gothenburg University's SOM Institute shows roughly equal support (around 30 percent) for joining NATO as those opposed. In 1994, when the SOM Institute began researching the question, 48 percent said joining was a bad idea versus 15 percent in favor.

How the issue develops will depend on the rival sides' abilities to convince voters ahead of the 2022 vote. If the pro-NATO side does well at the polls and knock the minority center-left incumbents out of power, they could push for a referendum on the question, experts say.

Moderate Party leader Ulf Kristersson has previously said that he believes Sweden will be a member of NATO before the decade is out and he called the NATO option vote "historic." In a social media post, he said it would allow Sweden to "update and modernize" its security stance and tell the world that Sweden is ready to join NATO at a future point of its choosing.

"A government can't just look away from a parliamentary majority view in a foreign policy or security question," he said. "We expect the government to get behind the parliament's security policy line."

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