

NATO's Forward Land Forces

A new type of international military operation for Sweden

Jan Frelin, Elin Jakobsson, and Anna Lövström Svedin

Like other NATO member militaries, the Swedish Armed Forces have shifted from deployments to out-of-area crisis management operations, to operations for deterrence and defence closer to home. This memo explores how such NATO deterrence operations compare to traditional out-of-area operations, focusing on Sweden's contribution to the Forward Land Forces in Latvia.

A SWEDISH BATTALION ARRIVED in Latvia on 18 January 2025, marking Sweden's first troop contribution as a NATO ally. When comparing the deployment to the Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Latvia with previous international operations (e.g. Mali or Afghanistan), a representative from the South Skåne Regiment (P7) said, "In those missions, our task has been to create peace. In this mission, we are going to a country at peace and are there to prevent war. We are there to deter."¹

In this memo, we aim to dig deeper into what it means for Sweden to contribute to deterrence operations like the FLF, in contrast to traditional peacekeeping operations, stabilisation operations, or training missions. This is of particular interest to Sweden as a new NATO member, as it now needs to navigate a new type of international military engagement.

The Swedish Armed Forces (SwAF) have a history of contributing to international military operations. The

earliest troop contribution was to the United Nations' first armed peacekeeping force, the UN Emergency Force, and deployed to the Suez Canal and the Sinai in 1956.² Since then, SwAF has contributed to more than 120 international military operations. Notable contributions include the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan, the Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo, and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in Mali.³ However, the deployment to MINUSMA ended one year earlier than originally planned. The SwAF unit Mali 16 conducted its final UN operation in November 2022, and Mali 17 arrived afterwards to complete the mission and repatriate materiel.⁴ The return of the last Swedish soldiers from Mali in April 2023 was seen as the end of an era, as it marked the first time since 1956 that Sweden had no large international troop contributions

1 Granlund, John. 'Nu landstiger svenska Nato-soldater i Lettland – första stationeringen utomlands.' *SVT Nyheter*. 18 January 2025. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/nu-landstiger-svenska-nato-soldater-i-lettland-forsta-stationeringen-utomlands>. Accessed: 29 January 2025. Translation from Swedish to English by authors.

2 United Nations. Our History. *United Nations Peacekeeping*. n.d. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/our-history>. Accessed: 4 February 2025.

3 Försvarsmakten. Afghanistan – RSM. 11 March 2025. <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/var-verksamhet/insatser-utomlands/avslutade-internationella-insatser/afghanistan-rsm/>. Accessed: 6 May 2025; Försvarsmakten. Afghanistan – ISAF. 16 July 2021. <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/information-och-fakta/var-historia/mer-historia/avslutade-truppinsatser/afghanistan-isaf/>. Accessed: 6 May 2025; Försvarsmakten. Mali – MINUSMA. 11 March 2025. <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/var-verksamhet/insatser-utomlands/avslutade-internationella-insatser/mali-minusma/>. Accessed: 6 May 2025.

4 Malibloggen. Sveriges sista FN-operation i Mali genomförd. *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*. 17 November 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230922202641/https://blogg.forsvarsmakten.se/malibloggen/2022/11/17/sveriges-sista-fn-operation-i-mali-genomford/>. Accessed: 6 May 2025; Aftonbladet. 'Svensk Malistyrka tas hem ett år tidigare.' 3 March 2022. <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/KzRbG6/svensk-malistyrka-tas-hem-ett-ar-tidigare>. Accessed: 6 May 2025.

deployed (albeit approximately 100 military observers, advisors, and other military personnel were still abroad).⁵

However, Sweden's NATO membership heralds a new era of international deployments. With Sweden's accession to the Alliance on 7 March 2024, NATO became the primary venue for international deployments for SwAF.⁶ Due to Russia's 2014 war against Ukraine, and the deteriorated European security situation, NATO's international operations have shifted from out-of-area crisis management to deterrence and defence operations on NATO territory. They are often called DDA operations, and their current definition is primarily mapped out in the 2020 NATO *Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA)*. With a battalion in Latvia during the spring of 2025, and plans to act as framework nation for FLF Finland potentially beginning in late 2025, Sweden has quickly committed contributions to NATO's DDA operations.⁷

But the question remains: How can this type of international military engagement be understood in relation to previous international missions and operations? Consequently, this study explores how NATO's Forward Land Forces in Latvia represent a new type of international military operation for the Swedish Armed Forces. The following research questions guide the analysis:

1. How can the concept of deterrence be understood in the context of DDA operations?
2. Using FLF Latvia as a case study, what distinguishes DDA operations from out-of-area operations, and what traits do they share?
3. What expectations do NATO allies have of Sweden's contribution, and what can Sweden expect to gain from this new type of international military engagement?

The sections of the memo address each of these research questions.

The analysis is based on 13 semi-structured interviews with 15 respondents, conducted between December 2024 and May 2025. Interviews were conducted with representatives from various military units related to FLF Latvia, specifically the host nation Latvia, the framework nation Canada, one of the contributing nations (Sweden), and the Multinational Division North (which has command of the Multinational Brigade in Latvia). Interviews were also conducted with government officials and academic researchers. Three respondents represented Sweden and the rest of the sample was evenly distributed with one to three respondents in each mentioned category.

The findings of the study are, first, that NATO's deterrence and defence activities have increased in recent years and are centred around the 2020 DDA concept. When applying deterrence theory to the DDA activities in general, and the FLF activities in particular, the concept of "costly actions" appears most significant. Second, that the main differences between DDA operations and out-of-area operations are the geographic and geopolitical context in which they take place, and the ultimate consequences at stake. The main similarity is multinationality, i.e., a group of nations jointly solving a military task. Third, the overall expectation from Allies on Sweden's contribution is that it will increase the capabilities of FLF Latvia. In return, Sweden can expect its contribution to provide learning opportunities, applied field experience, and demonstrate its commitment to NATO.

DETERRENCE THEORY AND DDA OPERATIONS

Deterrence is a central aspect of NATO's DDA operations. The mission of FLF Latvia is to deter, and be prepared to defend against, Russia. To explore deterrence, we therefore introduce key concepts from deterrence theory, and subsequently apply the theory to NATO's DDA activities.

5 Försvarsmakten. Sista svenska soldaten åter från Mali. 19 April 2023. <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/aktuellt/2023/04/sista-svenska-soldaten-ater-fran-mali/>. Accessed: 6 May 2025; Försvarsmakten. Current International Missions. 11 March 2025. <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/activities/current-international-missions/>. Accessed: 27 May 2025.

6 Regeringskansliet. Sveriges och Natos historia. 3 April 2024. <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/sverige-i-nato/sveriges-och-natos-historia/>. Accessed: 6 May 2025.

7 Finnish Ministry of Defence. Sweden announces ambition to take on role as Framework Nation in NATO enhanced forward presence to be established in Finland. 16 September 2024. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/sweden-announces-ambition-to-take-on-role-as-framework-nation-in-nato-enhanced-forward-presence-to-be-established-in-finland>. Accessed: 9 May 2025; Balkander, Mattias. 'Sverige kan leda Natobas i Finland.' *Göteborgs-Posten*. 16 September 2024. <https://www.gp.se/nyheter/sverige/sverige-kan-leda-natobas-i-finland.a20993db-28ad-4458-b30d-2db58640c5bc>. Accessed: 9 May 2025; Gestrin-Hagner, Maria. 'Pål Jonson: Då startar svenskledda styrkan i finska Lappland' *Dagens Nyheter*. 23 April 2025. <https://www.dn.se/varlden/pal-jonson-da-startar-svenskledda-styrkan-i-lappland/>. Accessed 18 August 2025.

Key concepts from deterrence theory

In the context of international relations, *deterrence* is a state's use of military and political means to discourage an aggressor from initiating unwanted acts, particularly armed conflict.⁸ To deter an aggressor from attacking, the defending state must project *intent* and *capability* to defend against the attack, so the aggressor's costs of attacking outweigh the potential benefits. A defending state simply claiming that it intends to defend itself may not be enough to deter the aggressor; it must demonstrate that this threat is *credible* and not just *cheap talk*.⁹ Hence, a defending state can try to demonstrate to a potential aggressor that it is serious about defending by supporting words with action. Two typical options for taking action are known as *tying hands* and *costly actions*, where the latter requires more effort. Tying hands means incurring a risk to the defender's reputation if the defender fails to act after having claimed it would.¹⁰ The desire to avoid reputational damage is what motivates the defender to follow through on its claim that it will defend itself. Costly actions refer to actions that entail substantial costs for the defender, thereby demonstrating the defender's credibility that it will indeed defend itself, since it has invested into the option.¹¹

Generally, it is more challenging for small states to deter than large states, since their military capability is lower. Therefore, small states often cooperate by utilising *extended deterrence*, which is when a state promises to help defend its allies if they are attacked.¹² NATO's Article 5 is a clear example of extended deterrence.

While deterrence theory can help us understand how states behave, there are problems with using

deterrence in practice. How does a state know whether it has sufficiently communicated its intent, or demonstrated its credibility, towards an adversary? When is deterrence achieved? Deterrence is never risk-free—even if both intent and capability have been persuasively demonstrated, the aggressor can still choose to attack based on its own cost-benefit analysis, which is unknown to the defender.¹³ These challenges may be even more severe in an alliance context, as states attempt to deter against an aggressor on behalf of another state, even when they may not share the same threat perception.¹⁴

Timeline of NATO's increasing deterrence and defence activities 2014–2025

Since the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014, NATO has continuously amplified the means to reassure Allies and to deter Russian expansion of the war into NATO territory, leading up to establishment of the first Forward Land Forces brigade in Latvia in 2024. In 2017, four multinational battlegroups under NATO command were deployed as its enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. In 2018, the NATO Readiness Initiative was launched, committing to provide 30 manoeuvre battalions, 30 air squadrons, and 30 major naval combatants with a readiness of 30 days or less.¹⁵

In 2020, NATO adopted the *Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA)*, a keystone strategy with the aim of providing “a single, coherent framework for NATO Allies to contest, deter and defend against the Alliance's main threats.”¹⁶ The DDA concept clearly marks the Alliance's shift from

8 Morgan, Patrick M. 'The Practice of Deterrence.' In *International Practices*, Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot (eds.), 139–173. Cambridge University Press, 2011; Mälksoo, Maria. 'NATO's New Front: Deterrence Moves Eastward.' *International Affairs*. Vol. 100, no. 2, 2024: 531–47.

9 Bowers, Ian. 'Small State Deterrence in the Contemporary World.' *IFS Insights*. No. 9, 2018: 1–8; Slantchev, Branislav L. *Military Threats: The Costs of Coercion and the Price of Peace*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 13–60; Kertzer, Joshua D., Renshon, Jonathan, and Yarhi-Milo, Keren. 'How Do Observers Assess Resolve?' *British Journal of Political Science*. Vol. 51, no. 1, 2021: 208–330; Quackenbush, Stephen L., and Zagare, Frank C. 'Modern Deterrence Theory: Research Trends, Policy Debates, and Methodological Controversies.' In *Oxford Handbook Topics in Politics*, Oxford Handbooks Editorial Board. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

10 Slantchev, *Military Threats*, 13–60.

11 Slantchev, *Military Threats*, 66–68; Nagin, Daniel S. 'Deterrence in the Twenty-First Century.' *Crime and Justice*. Vol. 42, no. 1, 2013: 199–263.

12 Bowers, 'Small State Deterrence in the Contemporary World'; Echevarria II, Antulio J. *Military Strategy. A Very Short Introduction*. 2nd edn. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024; Mälksoo, 'NATO's New Front: Deterrence Moves Eastward.'

13 Slantchev, *Military Threats*, 125; Morgan, 'The Practice of Deterrence.'

14 Mälksoo, 'NATO's New Front: Deterrence Moves Eastward.'

15 NATO. Deterrence and Defence. 13 December 2024. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_133127.htm. Accessed: 9 June 2025.

16 NATO, Deterrence and Defence.

conducting crisis management operations back to the founding task of the Alliance: deterrence and defence.¹⁷ Under the DDA framework, NATO has developed new strategic, domain-specific, and regional military plans to respond to any contingencies.¹⁸ The DDA concept emphasizes that no ally will be left alone to face threats to its territory or integrity, no threatening actor will be allowed to achieve an advantage over the Alliance in capability, readiness, or geography, and that every inch of Alliance territory will be defended by all Allies. The DDA concept aims to thwart all kinds of threats against Allies, a strategy known as NATO's 360-degree approach. In this memo, we focus on the threat constituted by other nation states (particularly Russia) and exclude terrorism. The DDA concept acknowledges that effective deterrence starts in peacetime, or in the grey zone, and that any aggressive actions should be met swiftly with so-called vigilance activities before a threat is established. To that end, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) has been given authority to deploy certain high-readiness forces in peacetime.¹⁹

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, additional eFP battlegroups were deployed to Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, doubling their total number from four to eight. Vigilance activities were also accelerated. At NATO's Madrid Summit in 2022, it was decided to expand the eFP battalion-sized battlegroups into brigade formations, called Forward Land Forces. However, this scaling up is to take place "where and when required," maintaining flexibility for the Allies involved.²⁰ The 2022 summit also saw Allies agree to replace the previous NATO Response Force with a new

NATO Force Model, thereby nominally increasing the amount of high readiness forces.²¹

These developments were followed by the acceptance of new regional defence plans in 2023. In 2024, the multi-domain Allied Reaction Force was established to provide more alternatives for responding to threats, as part of the NATO Force Model.²²

In July 2024, Latvia became the first of the NATO Allies with a forward presence to scale up the eFP battlegroup into a multinational brigade.²³ In January 2025, Sweden deployed a reduced mechanised infantry battalion with 600 soldiers to the Multinational Brigade in Latvia.²⁴ The Swedish contribution should be seen as one component of the overall allied deterrence of Russian aggression against NATO territory.

Applying deterrence theory to NATO's forward presence

The key trends identified in the timeline that are of relevance for this memo are NATO's shift from crisis management operations back to deterrence and defence operations on NATO territory, the doubling of eFP battlegroups on NATO's eastern flank after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the scaling up of (some of) the battalion-sized battlegroups to brigades.

The concepts of *tying hands* and *costly actions* can be useful to describe NATO's deterrence and defence activities along the eastern flank, specifically the shift from eFP to FLF. The eFP battalion-sized battlegroups could be construed as a tying-hands option—by deploying small contributions to the eastern flank, Allies are tying themselves to the region in case of an aggression.

17 Covington, Stephen R. NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA). *The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*. 2 August 2023. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/natos-concept-deterrence-and-defence-euro-atlantic-area-dda>. Accessed: 15 May 2025; Monaghan, Sean, Kjellström Elgin, Katherine, and Bjerg Moller, Sara. *Understanding NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area*. Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2024. <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/understanding-natos-concept-for-deterrence-and-defense-of-the-euro-atlantic-area>. Accessed: 15 May 2025.

18 NATO, Deterrence and Defence.

19 Covington, NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA); Monaghan et al., *Understanding NATO's Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area*.

20 NATO. Madrid Summit Declaration. 29 June 2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm. Accessed: 27 May 2025; Gustafsson, Jakob and Hagström Frisell, Eva. *A New Generation of Forward Defence—NATO in the Baltic states*. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2025.

21 NATO, NEW NATO FORCE MODEL. n.d. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220629-infographic-new-nato-force-model.pdf. Accessed: 9 May 2025.

22 NATO, Deterrence and Defence; NATO. Allied Reaction Force (ARF). 16 April 2025. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_234091.htm. Accessed: 9 May 2025.

23 NATO. NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance. 6 March 2025. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm. Accessed: 2 May 2025.

24 Granlund, 'Nu landstiger svenska Nato-soldater i Lettland—första stationeringen utomlands' *SVT Nyheter*; Swedish Armed Forces. Historic Swedish force arrives in Latvia. 18 January 2025. <https://www.forsvarsmakten.se/en/news/2025/01/historic-swedish-force-arrives-in-latvia/>. Accessed: 9 May 2025.

If an aggression were to occur and the contributing states did not act, those states would suffer serious reputational damage. This potential reputational cost thereby provides some credibility to Allies' promises that they will indeed send reinforcements in the event of an attack.

The current scaling up from eFP-era battlegroups to brigade formations can be seen as a step towards a costly-actions option—it is costly for contributing nations to deploy brigades. Additionally, the deterrence literature suggests that deploying ground combat formations is the most effective example of costly actions (compared to deploying naval and air assets), simply because they take the most effort to deploy.²⁵ Applying the costly-actions theory, the reason that not all of the battlegroups are increasing to permanent brigade presences may be that it is costly for the involved states to do so, and that this cost outweighs the benefits of scaling up. Alternatively, it may be because it is unnecessary, if the tying-hands option of a battlegroup is deemed sufficient. Therefore, the states in which the battalion-sized battlegroup is evolving to a rotational or permanent brigade presence (not just by reinforcement)—Latvia and Lithuania—could be seen as reflecting a greater threat in those areas and therefore a need to demonstrate more commitment and credibility.²⁶ Alternatively, it may be because the alignment of the involved Allies' threat perception is greater, thereby lowering their perceived costs of contributing to the operations there.

FLF VS. OUT-OF-AREA OPERATIONS

This section explores what factors distinguish DDA operations, specifically FLF Latvia, from out-of-area operations, as well as what traits they share. By out-of-area operations, we mean expeditionary crisis management, peacekeeping, and/or stabilisation operations and missions outside NATO territory. The interviews suggest that the main distinguishing factors of FLF Latvia from out-of-area operations are the geographic and geopolitical context in which it takes place, as well as the potential consequences if deterrence is unsuccessful, while the main similarity identified is the multinational environment on site.

Most of the military practitioners interviewed for this study also had previous experience in out-of-area operations, especially in stabilisation operations such as ISAF, Iraq, United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), Stabilisation Force (SFOR), and MINUSMA.²⁷ Some also had experience in peacekeeping operations such as KFOR, United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), and United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).²⁸ Against this background, they were asked to reflect upon the differences and similarities between these different types of operations.

NATO's DDA operations in general, including FLF, are often referred to as deterrence operations. As we discussed above, deterrence is indeed a defining feature of this type of engagement, and many practitioners point to the mission of "deter, be prepared to defend" as a key difference between the FLF deployment and previous crisis management deployments.²⁹ A closer look, however, reveals that a number of other differences might actually prove more consequential. At the same time, there are also a number of similarities that cannot be overlooked.

One important difference emerging from our interviews is the character of the conflict, i.e., preparation for war against Russia rather than fighting insurgents.³⁰ In addition, the vested interests of involved states are deemed higher in NATO's DDA operations. For Latvia, it is an existential question, but contributing nations also have higher stakes in the future of Latvia and the defence of NATO, compared to previous stabilisation and peacekeeping operations.³¹ Another way to view this is that deterrence operations do not have a real end, as deterrence cannot be ultimately achieved, only upheld, while out-of-area operations have an end, as a mission's objective may be achieved or contributing partners may leave for other reasons.

Yet another difference is the environment in Latvia, which is distinct from the one experienced in stabilisation operations. In Latvia, NATO forces are deployed on Allied territory, where the public is largely friendly, peacetime conditions prevail, and stakes are more or less aligned among stakeholders.³² This situation allows

25 Slantchev, *Military Threats*, 256–257; Kertzer et al, 'How Do Observers Assess Resolve?'

26 NATO, NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance.

27 Interviews 1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 11, 12.

28 Interviews 1, 10, 11, 12.

29 Interviews 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12.

30 Interviews 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13.

31 Interviews 2, 4, 7, 8.

32 Interviews 1, 3, 4, 5, 7.

for a focus on training and readiness.³³ In stabilisation operations, on the other hand, soldiers always have to expect to be subjected to violence.³⁴

DDA operations and out-of-area operations are both multinational endeavours where states come together to work towards a shared objective. On that point, some interviewees view NATO interoperability and command and control arrangements as a similarity between DDA operations in Latvia and several stabilisation operations,³⁵ while others see them as a difference.³⁶ This means that while structures and objectives may differ, there is an ambition in both cases to make sure that procedures are compatible. Further, stabilisation operations were focused on fighting in battlegroups, while the formations for DDA operations are generally higher—brigades and divisions.³⁷ A simpler but significant observation is that Latvia has a closer relationship, and is geographically closer, to the European sending states. This facilitates different kinds of logistical and military exchanges.³⁸

Circling back to deterrence, peacekeeping operations have a more ambiguous relationship with the concept. For example, KFOR initially had an explicit mission to deter a Serbian attack on Kosovo, as well as contingency plans for defending Kosovo.³⁹ This is in some ways more similar to the current mission of FLF than our interviews indicate. In addition, there is an emerging literature that suggests that deterrence is a central aspect of successful peacekeeping in general.⁴⁰ This point is still disputed,⁴¹ but deterrence as a potential

factor of success for peacekeeping cannot be dismissed. In contrast, stabilisation operations normally entail endemic violence, where intervening forces have to fight to achieve military objectives. In a way, one could thus say that stabilisation operations indicate a situation where deterrence no longer works.

A key difference, apart from the ones already mentioned, is the character of the relationship between the framework and contributing nations, to the host nations. On the one hand, there is the operation to defend NATO territory. There is an underlying tension here between frontline states and sending states, where frontline states tend to fear abandonment while sending states tend to fear entrapment (i.e., when states become entrapped in an ally's conflict over interests that are not shared, or only partially shared).⁴² Despite that, the stakes are high enough to allow for a sufficient alignment of interests between frontline states and sending states.⁴³ The situation is characterised by peacetime conditions that allow training and increasing readiness. In case deterrence fails, the fight will be against a near-peer adversary that will require NATO forces to fight in higher formations.

On the other hand, there are distant expeditionary operations, where there is an underlying tension in the asymmetrical power relationship between the expeditionary forces and the local population, sometimes referred to as the “peacekeepers” and the “peacekept,” respectively.⁴⁴ This tension can sometimes challenge the conditions for a successful outcome. Even in peace, the

33 Interviews 2, 12.

34 Interview 3.

35 Interviews 6, 7, 13.

36 Interview 8.

37 Interview 10.

38 Interviews 6, 11.

39 Jackson, Mike M. ‘KFOR: The inside story.’ *RUSI Journal: Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies*. Vol. 145, no. 1, 2000: 13–18.

40 Harvey, Frank. ‘Deterrence and Ethnic Conflict: The Case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1993–94.’ *Security Studies*. Vol. 6, no. 3, 1997: 180–210; Krahmann, Elke. ‘Everyday Visuality and Risk Management: Representing (in)Security in UN Peacekeeping.’ *Contemporary Security Policy*. Vol. 42, no. 1, 2021: 83–112; Kruglova, Anna. ‘Does Peacekeeping Deter Terrorism?’ *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*. Vol. 14, no. 1, 2021: 50–71; Larsdotter, Kersti. ‘Military Strategy and Peacekeeping: An Unholy Alliance?’ *Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol. 42, no. 2, 2019: 191–211; Newby, Vanessa F. ‘Offering the Carrot and Hiding the Stick?: Conceptualizing Credibility in UN Peacekeeping.’ *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*. Vol. 28, no. 3, 2022: 303–329; Ruggeri, Andrea, Dorussen, Han and Gizelis, Theodora-Ismene. ‘Winning the Peace Locally: UN Peacekeeping and Local Conflict.’ *International Organization*. Vol. 71, no. 1, 2017: 163–185.

41 Morjé Howard, Lise. *Power in Peacekeeping*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

42 Snyder, Glenn H. ‘The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics.’ *World Politics*. Vol. 36, no. 4, 1984: 461–495.

43 Henry, Iain D. ‘What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence.’ *International Security*. Vol. 44, no. 4, 2020: 45–83.

44 Henry, Marsha. *The End of Peacekeeping: Gender, Race, and the Martial Politics of Intervention*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024.

situation calls for constant patrolling in order to demonstrate presence.⁴⁵ The limited stakes for sending states create “wars of choice,” where expeditionary forces can leave if conditions deteriorate. In case peace fails, the fight turns into what has been called “war amongst the people,”⁴⁶ where insurgent opponents that employ asymmetric tactics face expeditionary forces in battle-group formations.

Conclusions on the shared and differentiating traits of DDA operations, showcased by FLF Latvia, and out-of-area operations can be summarised in the following way. The FLF contribution differs from out-of-area operations in that it is deployed to Allied territory and that the host nation’s threat perception overlaps with Sweden’s. Additional differences identified are that the stakes for sending states are higher in DDA operations, that the adversary is a near-peer competitor, and that operations are conducted in higher formations, i.e., at the division and brigade level. We argue that these factors seem to have stronger distinguishing power regarding the differences between the two types of military operations than the element of deterrence itself.

However, there are also several ways in which the contribution to NATO’s Forward Land Forces is similar to previous international operations. For instance, deterrence is sometimes part of the mandate in these types of missions and operations, and it is a military operation outside of Sweden’s borders, implying that there are similar logistical challenges of moving personnel and materiel abroad. Both types of operations also share the multinational element, including NATO command and control arrangements, as well as the ever-present challenge (or opportunity) of interoperability.

SWEDEN IN THE FORWARD LAND FORCES

Having provided an overview of the theoretical concept of deterrence and of NATO’s DDA operations, as well as the differences and similarities to traditional out-of-area operations, we now move on to analysing the expectations placed on Sweden and those Sweden itself has in relation to the Forward Land Forces.

Most of the interviews were conducted prior to Sweden’s January 2025 deployment. Although Sweden has completed its first rotation in Latvia at the time of publication, the expectations remain relevant for future

rotations as well as ahead of a potential FLF deployment to Finland. The overarching expectation from Allies regarding Sweden’s contribution is that it will increase the capabilities of FLF Latvia. In return, Sweden can expect its contributions to provide learning opportunities and experience for the SwAF, as well as demonstrate its commitment to NATO. We find, however, that the expectations on Sweden as a new NATO member vary, and that navigating those expectations while fulfilling national objectives will be a challenge in the coming years. We elaborate on this below.

The decision to deploy Swedish troops to the Forward Land Forces in Latvia has been met with gratitude and appreciation from the nations on site, not least from Canada as the framework nation, Denmark as Sweden’s rotating partner, and Latvia as the host nation. During Sweden’s pre-membership period in the Partnership for Peace (PfP), Sweden built up a good relationship with several other NATO members. As a result, it enjoys considerable soft power in Latvia, which is further strengthened through Swedish investments and companies.⁴⁷

Sweden is considered an important strategic partner, and is expected to contribute highly professional military personnel and capabilities to the FLF. The SwAF contributes with one reduced mechanised infantry battalion and firepower including main battle tanks (Leopard 2A5) and armoured combat vehicles (CV90).⁴⁸ Additionally, the interviewees reported expectations on Swedish military capabilities beyond the FLF, that are both scarce and in high demand in NATO. Such capabilities include specific ones such as protection of critical undersea infrastructure and participation in Baltic Sentry, as well as more general capabilities such as air force, industrial capacity, and naval capabilities.⁴⁹

By establishing presence in the Forward Land Forces, as well as offering the abovementioned additional capabilities, Sweden is displaying and cementing its commitment to the Alliance. This commitment is perhaps the most important expectation that other Allies have of Sweden. The FLF contribution is not only a military, but also a political, signal. Once that presence was established in Latvia, the political stakes were considerably raised and the option of withdrawing became very costly. The commitment to the FLF is a major step towards becoming fully integrated in

45 Newby, ‘Offering the Carrot and Hiding the Stick?’

46 Smith, Rupert. *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. 2nd edn. London: Penguin Books, 2019.

47 Interviews 6, 12.

48 Swedish Armed Forces, Historic Swedish force arrives in Latvia; Bratell, Johan. Svenskarna ”glänste” under Nato-övning. *Expressen*. 5 May 2025. <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/sverige/svenskarna-glanste-under-nato-ovning/>. Accessed: 9 June 2025.

49 Interviews 2, 8, 12.

NATO, and it shows, both domestically and internationally, that Sweden “is NATO” now.⁵⁰ For NATO as a whole, Swedish presence in Latvia signals greater commitment from the Alliance and thus greater deterrence against Russia.

Another, perhaps more concrete, expectation between the Alliance and Sweden is that the Swedish contribution to FLF Latvia will increase interoperability among Allies. The day-to-day work of the Multinational Brigade chiefly entails joint training and exercises, testing how best to use different weapons systems together, and improving logistics. This is to enhance interoperability between the nations, and thereby increase military capabilities and deterrence towards Russia.⁵¹ Sweden will get to experience work at the brigade level, learn how NATO conducts operations, its command and control arrangements, and staff commands. While Sweden has participated in exercises with NATO for years as a PfP partner, Swedish NATO membership and deployment to the FLF enables collaborative work on a new level. Interviewees also point to the environment in Latvia as a good training space, and an opportunity to test new equipment and concepts. Interviewees frequently referred to this as a learning experience, where Sweden can learn how NATO does deterrence in practice, and with elements that are difficult to exercise at home, e.g., training with air defence, artillery, and in a brigade formation.⁵² From a Swedish perspective, the deployed soldiers can expect training infused by the “Baltic threat perception” and the elements of realness and danger.⁵³

Moreover, in comparison to the other FLFs, the Multinational Brigade in Latvia is the most multinational, with representation from 14 states, which is over a third of NATO members. Therefore, the opportunity to function in a multinational context and learn from a variety of other Allies is significant.⁵⁴ As one interviewee

put it, “Sweden will be exposed to multinationality at a new level.”⁵⁵ In relation to the previous section presenting similarities and differences compared to out-of-area operations, we would like to point out that many international peacekeeping operations, stabilisation operations, and training missions have also involved a high level of multinationality. While a DDA operation like FLF Latvia includes a stronger commitment, higher stakes, and thus higher demands on functioning cooperation and interoperability, we argue that previous multinational military engagements provide experiences that the SwAF can usefully draw on in this new context.

Sweden is also expected to care for and strengthen the relationship with the host country Latvia as part of its FLF presence. Latvian representatives referred to the long common history between Sweden and Latvia and expressed feelings of closeness and a similar mindset—both of which are expected to foster greater understanding and good cooperation.⁵⁶ However, we could also see signs of lingering scars in the Swedish–Latvian relationship, such as the extradition of Baltic soldiers and refugees from Sweden to the Soviet Union in 1946 and the previous Swedish neutrality policy.⁵⁷ These aspects may be more present in the Baltic collective memory, and may implicitly shape their perception of Sweden as an ally in a way that Sweden has not expected.

Spillover effects from the military relationship with the host country are also expected—primarily positive ones, such as business opportunities and hopes of Swedish investments in the Latvian defence industry.⁵⁸ The Latvian Prime Minister Evika Silina expressed this expectation of defence industry cooperation at the Transfer of Authority ceremony on 7 February 2025, when the Swedish battalion officially integrated into the Multinational Brigade.⁵⁹ Just a few weeks later, various Sweden–Latvia defence industry agreements were

⁵⁰ Interviews 10, 12, 13.

⁵¹ Interview 13.

⁵² Interviews 1, 3, 10.

⁵³ Interviews 1, 4, 10.

⁵⁴ Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5, 10.

⁵⁵ Interview 1.

⁵⁶ Interview 8.

⁵⁷ Interview 9.

⁵⁸ Interviews 5, 8.

⁵⁹ The Baltic Times. Sweden’s joining of NATO forces in Latvia will open new opportunities for defense industry cooperation – Silina. *The Baltic Times*. 7 February 2025. https://www.baltictimes.com/sweden_s_joining_of_nato_forces_in_latvia_will_open_new_opportunities_for_defense_industry_cooperation_-_silina/. Accessed: 9 June 2025; NATO. Swedish Troops Officially Integrate Into NATO Command Latvia. 10 February 2025. <https://jfcbs.nato.int/page5964943/2025/swedish-troops-officially-integrate-into-nato-command-latvia>. Accessed: 9 June 2025.

signed, regarding air defence systems, artillery systems, and small arms ammunition.⁶⁰ In addition to citing positive spillover effects interviewees also raised some concerns, for instance regarding whether Sweden is prepared to manage potential situations involving misconduct by its soldiers while deployed.⁶¹ This management is important, as the reputation of Swedish soldiers has the potential to either harm or nurture the relationship with the host country, through their interactions with the public, the military, and the politicians.

There is an expectation that Sweden will be prepared for the worst-case scenario, but also that it will handle incidents that are below the threshold of Article 5, known as hybrid or grey-zone warfare.⁶² Although conventional warfare is not ongoing in Latvia, Russia does engage in hybrid warfare.⁶³ Such measures are utilised by Russia to test Western responses and could include false accusations against foreign troops in Latvia for misbehaviour affecting public opinion, weaponisation of migration, or undersea-cable incidents.⁶⁴ In the words of one interviewee, Sweden must be able to differentiate between real and fake mushroom pickers near military exercises, and handle the situation accordingly, while upholding the trust of the host nation.⁶⁵ To that point, there are uncertainties within NATO regarding how to handle activities that take place below or prior to Article 5 activation.⁶⁶ One challenge is the difficulty of attribution and of providing satisfactory evidence.⁶⁷ Latvia has been exposed to Russian sabotage and hybrid

warfare since regaining independence, and is prepared to act alone initially.⁶⁸ The Multinational Brigade has some capabilities to counter disinformation and cyber threats,⁶⁹ but if questions about how to handle pre-Article 5 incidents continue to remain unresolved within NATO, one option may be to establish bilateral agreements between Latvia and each nation contributing to the Multinational Brigade.⁷⁰ Although such a solution might make Latvia safer in the short term, we note that a development in which Allies rely on bilateral agreements instead of a unified NATO strategy for handling grey-zone incidents could weaken NATO in the current and future security landscape.

Additional concerns are raised regarding Sweden's contribution and commitment. One such concern is Sweden's prioritisation, related to Sweden's plans to take on the role of framework nation for FLF Finland, potentially beginning in late 2025.⁷¹ While this would strengthen NATO as a collective, it might also raise concerns in Latvia and the Multinational Brigade as to whether Sweden will shift its resources to Finland in the future.

The range of expectations expressed in the interviews makes it clear that what on the surface appears to be a coherent NATO operation is, in fact, a microcosm of different actors with, to some extent, different objectives and concerns. A key challenge for Sweden will be to navigate those different interests and expectations.⁷² For instance, NATO as a whole has certain expectations that are based on members' commitments

60 SAAB. Saab receives order for RBS 70 NG from Latvia. 31 March 2025. <https://www.saab.com/newsroom/press-releases/2025/saab-receives-order-for-rbs-70-ng-from-latvia>. Accessed: 9 June 2025; Latvian Ministry of Defence. Latvia and Sweden sign Letter of Intent to Supply Archer 8x8 Artillery Systems to National Armed Forces. 11 June 2025. <https://www.mod.gov.lv/en/news/latvia-and-sweden-sign-letter-intent-supply-archer-8x8-artillery-systems-national-armed-forces>. Accessed: 17 June 2025; Baltic News Network. Swedish defense company acquires Latvia's Ammunition. BNN. 16 June 2025. <https://bnn-news.com/swedish-defense-company-acquires-latvias-ammunity-268745>. Accessed: 17 June 2025.

61 Interviews 5, 8.

62 Coombs, Howard G., and Marsh, Christopher (eds.). *Operating on the Margins: SOF in the Gray Zone*. Ottawa: Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, 2023; Hoffman, Frank G. *Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of hybrid wars*. Arlington: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, 2007; Murray, Williamson, and Mansoor, Peter R. (eds.). *Hybrid warfare: Fighting complex opponents from the ancient world to the present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

63 Interview 6; Lanoszka, Alexander. 'Russian Hybrid Warfare and Extended Deterrence in Eastern Europe.' *International Affairs*. Vol. 92, no. 1, 2016: 175–195.

64 Interviews 2, 8.

65 Interview 4.

66 Interview 7.

67 Interview 6.

68 Interviews 4, 8.

69 Interview 13.

70 Interview 7.

71 Finnish Ministry of Defence, Sweden announces ambition to take on role as Framework Nation in NATO enhanced forward presence to be established in Finland; Balkander, 'Sverige kan leda Natobas i Finland.' Gestrin-Hagner. 'Pål Jonson.'

72 Jarl, Linda, Löfström Svedin, Anna, and Frelin, Jan. *Natos betydelse för Försvarsmaktens internationella engagemang—ett nordiskt perspektiv*. FOI Memo 8458. Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), 2024.

and contributions overall, and might care less about whether Swedish priorities are geared towards Latvia or Finland. However, for the individual host or framework nations, Swedish preference for one or the other may be a key concern. Along the same line of reasoning, NATO is interested in how the Swedish contribution strengthens the interoperability and military capability of the Alliance, while Latvia hopes for spillover effects such as business opportunities and closer cultural ties between the two countries.

In sum, the interviews demonstrate a deep and widespread positivity towards the Swedish contribution to the Multinational Brigade in Latvia. Not only is the Swedish battalion expected to contribute critical military capabilities, but the symbolic contribution is equally important. By participating in the Forward Land Forces alongside Allied member states, and thereby fully committing to the defence of NATO territory, Sweden demonstrates that it is not merely a partner, but a trustworthy Ally in the fullest NATO sense. From a Swedish perspective, the rotations in Latvia will offer opportunities to train in a multinational environment with a heightened threat perception, yet in the context of a friendly host nation. Next, we summarise the analysis conducted in this memo and look to the future.

CONCLUSION

This memo investigates how Sweden's contribution to NATO's DDA operations, specifically the Forward Land Forces Latvia, represents a new type of international military operation for the SwAF. The analysis is guided by three research questions. Firstly, how can we understand the concept of deterrence in the context of DDA operations? Secondly, using FLF Latvia as a case, what similarities and differences can be identified between DDA and out-of-area operations? Thirdly, what expectations do Allies have of Sweden's contribution, and what can Sweden expect from its deployment to Latvia?

To address the first question, we outline the development of NATO's increasing deterrence and defence activities, including the eFP and its successor, the Forward Land Forces. The most prominent element of the DDA concept is that of deterrence. We establish that the scaling up to brigade-size formations in the Forward Land Forces can be interpreted as a "costly action," and understood as deterrence against conventional threats. However, the deterrence effect against unconventional attacks, such as hybrid warfare, remains weak.

Comparing DDA operations (represented here by FLF Latvia) to out-of-area operations, we find that the most significant similarity between the different types of

operations lies in their multinationality. Both kinds of operations involve a number of peer nations who share a common military task, targeted towards a common adversary. That includes common challenges and opportunities regarding command and control structures as well as increasing interoperability. Nevertheless, there are crucial differences between the two types of operations, not least regarding the context and the stakes. FLF Latvia, and other DDA operations, is conducted in a peaceful and friendly allied nation, meaning that the deployed troops can use their time there for training and are able to do private excursions outside of the military camp in their spare time. Simultaneously, the potential ultimate endgame of all DDA operations is to defend, meaning that the stakes for all deployed forces are high and that they are committed to stay even in the case of military aggression. In an out-of-area operation, on the other hand, the option to leave is always available to some extent. The adversary in DDA operations is also of a different character from that in out-of-area operations, where the opponent in the former case is a powerful state, and in the latter is often smaller insurgent groups.

Zooming in specifically on Sweden in the Forward Land Forces, we find that the answer to the third question about expectations centres around four interwoven core elements: the potential for learning, the increased interoperability, the boost of capabilities, and, last but not least, demonstrating the Swedish commitment to NATO. However, there are also concerns about how Sweden will prioritise, with participation in the FLF in Latvia but also in Finland in the future.

At the time of publication, the Swedish battalion has recently returned home from its first rotation in Latvia during the spring of 2025. The following insights generated from this study are particularly important to consider for future rotations.

The interviews highlight that the main challenges for upholding continuity over time and through a large number of rotations are to institutionalise the lessons-learned process and to uphold soldiers' motivation. The 2025 battalion has likely faced a steep initial learning curve. These experiences and lessons must be absorbed at all levels in order to make processes more efficient, facilitate future rotations, and avoid repeating mistakes. The SwAF still have some work to do regarding formalities such as amending agreements and conditions for deployment. Moreover, Sweden's first rotation was characterised by high interest from qualified soldiers. The interviewees, however, raised concerns regarding the challenge of sustaining this interest throughout the second, third rotations, and beyond, to Latvia, while

also contributing to Finland.⁷³ When the initial thrill has subsided, how can the SwAF ensure that deployment to FLF remains a desirable option for Swedish military personnel?

The rotational partnership that Sweden and Denmark have, with alternating six-month rotations to Latvia, should be observed. What consequences and opportunities does this arrangement entail? What lessons can Sweden apply to the future FLF in Finland?

Looking ahead, we find that the SwAF and the Swedish MoD should continue to distinguish between deployments to DDA operations and out-of-area operations, given the identified differences presented earlier. Nevertheless, Sweden's long-standing engagement in international military missions means that lessons learned from such operations should be applied, as many are directly relevant to the planning and execution of deterrence and the defence of Allied territory.

Jan Frelin is a Deputy Research Director at FOI. His primary research interests are military doctrine and concepts, and the conduct of military operations.

Elin Jakobsson is a researcher at FOI. She holds a PhD in International Relations, and her research at FOI focuses on international military missions and military doctrine.

Anna Lövström Svedin is an analyst at FOI. She has a background in peace and conflict research, and conducts research on international relations and Nordic security.

⁷³ Interview 12.

