

Germany: a New Swedish Ally in Europe?

Eva Hagström Frisell and Anna Sundberg

Germany's importance to Sweden and the security of Sweden's neighbourhood have increased in recent years. Germany and Sweden have also shown an interest in deeper bilateral defence cooperation. At first glance, the prospects for closer defence ties are promising. An analysis of the security policy documents that the two countries have recently adopted, however, reveals that they have fundamentally different views of how national security can best be advanced. Germany and Sweden also have different roles in Europe. While Germany is a centrally located major power that plays a prominent role in European security policy, Sweden is a medium-sized state with more of a regional focus on security and stability.

NEW PRECONDITIONS FOR COOPERATION

The deteriorating security situation in Europe's neighbourhood and the current challenges to European unity mean that both Germany and Sweden find themselves in the hunt for new cooperation partners. Germany has long been Europe's economic superpower, but has in recent years also emerged as one of the leaders of Europe's security policy. There are numerous challenges to European security to deal with. The expectations of German leadership from the rest of Europe have grown not only since the Russian aggression against Ukraine, but also since the election of President Donald J. Trump in the United States and the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union. Europe's traditional major powers in matters of security and defence are much preoccupied with other challenges: the UK must try to find a role outside the EU while struggling to maintain internal unity; and France is primarily focused on dealing with terrorism, both domestic and international.

In recent years, the German government has demonstrated an increased willingness to meet external expectations. Germany's readiness to assume greater responsibility for international security is a recurring message in policy statements and is also reflected in

its actions. One example is that Germany has taken the lead in the battalion-sized battlegroup established within the framework of NATO's enhanced forward presence in Lithuania. From a German perspective, however, this is more about assuming responsibility within certain limits. Germany's engagement must not be perceived as overly dominant. Thus, German security and defence policy will continue to be formulated in close cooperation with others, and NATO and EU cooperation to comprise its main pillars.

Sweden also has a strong interest in contributing to stability and security, especially in its neighbourhood, and national defence has come back into the limelight in recent years. In contrast to German decision-makers, however, the Swedish government continues to see military non-alignment as an important principle and exclude both NATO membership and deeper defence cooperation within the EU. Sweden is focused instead on strengthening its bilateral ties with other states. The relationship with the US has a special status. In addition, Sweden has placed extra emphasis on developing its operational military cooperation with Finland. Sweden's declaration of solidarity also encompasses all the EU member states, as well as the Nordic countries. Of the above, Sweden's foremost ambition is to expand cooperation with the other Nordic and Baltic countries. Bilateral cooperation agreements with the UK and Poland have also been signed.

Like Germany, Sweden is influenced by the changes in the security policy landscape. Sweden must find a replacement for the UK as a close partner in the EU and might eventually need another security policy ally than the US. Germany, the major political and economic power in Europe, lies close at hand. The Swedish government has also stated that Germany is playing a key role in stabilizing Sweden's neighbourhood, and thus that it sees a direct connection between German and Swedish security. Sweden and Germany entered a discussion on deepened cooperation in 2016 and the defence ministers of both countries signed a joint letter of intent on cooperation in June 2017. From a security



policy perspective, however, defence cooperation with Germany cannot have the same weight as the relationship with the US and the UK, the two major military powers that have the greatest capacity to act militarily in Sweden's neighbourhood.

RECENTLY DEFINED NATIONAL INTERESTS

Germany and Sweden have recently defined their respective national interests. Germany published a new White Paper on German security policy and the future direction of its armed forces in July 2016. The Swedish government released a national security strategy in January 2017.¹ Defining national interests in this way had earlier been politically sensitive in both countries, and there has been an unwillingness to take a stand on these issues.

Even if the documents differ in character and scope, they provide clues about the potential for deeper bilateral cooperation. Both documents have been adopted by their respective national governments, which accords them greater weight and relevance than if they were just the products of their respective defence ministries. That Germany's three largest parties stand behind the document further increases the likelihood that this direction will be maintained over time. The German White Paper was drafted in an inclusive process that offered various parts of society an opportunity to contribute. The aim was to foster a participatory approach, explain German security policy and enrich the debate.

In Sweden, the process of seeking consensus among the political parties on security and defence policy normally proceeds within the framework of the parliamentary commission on defence. Sweden's national security strategy, however, was produced by the government without any direct negotiation with the opposition parties. Prime Minister Stefan Löfven has nonetheless expressed the hope that the national unity that usually prevails in matters of Swedish security policy will also apply to the implementation of the new strategy. The ministers and deputy ministers on the newly established security policy council are

¹ Die Bundesregierung, *Weissbuch 2016 zur Sicherheitspolitik und zur Zukunft der Bundeswehr* (the document is also available in English: *White Paper 2016 On German Security Policy and the Future of the Bundeswehr*); and Regeringskansliet [The Government Offices], Statsrådsberedningen [The Prime Minister's Office], *Nationell säkerhetsstrategi* [National Security Strategy], January 2017.

to have special responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the strategy.

CONSENSUS ON THREATS AND SECURITY

The direction of national security policy has thus been set in different ways, but the documents have many similarities. Germany and Sweden both present broad views of security. This is reflected not only in how national security is seen as a concern of the whole of society, but also in how the security challenges identified span a broad spectrum.

Germany and Sweden also share many geostrategic features and these similarities are reflected in their respective threat perceptions. Both documents paint similar pictures of security policy developments in Europe. They describe a worsened security situation, in which Russia is challenging the prevailing security order, while Europe faces significant internal challenges and its southern neighbourhood is characterized by conflict.

The security challenges identified are also to a great extent the same for both countries, even if in practice there are differences in their national security policy debates. Germany, for example, has for many years had a greater focus on terrorism, but this has now also become a central question in Sweden. The national debate in Sweden is focused on the Russian threat in its vicinity to a greater extent than it is in Germany. Both documents, however, present a broad list of challenges and threats, which range from military incidents, disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and terrorism, to organised crime, climate change and pandemics. In addition, both countries emphasise the importance of a strong transatlantic link and US significance for European security, at the same time as they express support for stronger European integration.

A direct comparison of the national interests listed in the respective documents shows that they are much the same in both (see table 1). They differ, however, on two essential points. First, the German White Paper states that a strong German economy and free world trade are in its own security interest, while corresponding statements in the Swedish strategy discuss the promotion of a regulated, multilateral world order. Second, German security interests also include the protection of allies and strong transatlantic

cooperation. The Swedish strategy instead considers the promotion of stability and security in its immediate neighbourhood to be in its national interest.

Table 1. Comparison of German and Swedish security interests

Germany's security interests	Sweden's national interests
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To protect the population, sovereignty and Germany's territorial integrity • To protect the population, sovereignty and territorial integrity of allies • To maintain a rules-based international order • To ensure the prosperity of the population through a strong German economy and free world trade • To promote responsible use of limited goods and scarce resources • To deepen European integration • To consolidate the transatlantic partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure the safety, security and health of Sweden's inhabitants • To secure the supply of and protect critical societal functions • To uphold fundamental values: democracy, the rule of law, human rights and freedoms • To defend, under all circumstances, Sweden's freedom, security and right to self-determination • To promote the stability and security of our neighbouring areas • To maintain and strengthen cooperation, stability and integration within the EU • To promote a rules-based multilateral world order

CRUCIAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COOPERATION PRIORITIES

Consensus around threats and challenges as well as the need for a holistic approach to tackling these challenges would seem to be a good basis for deepening bilateral cooperation between Sweden and Germany. After detailed analysis, however, obvious differences emerge. The major difference lies in the priority given to the various forms of security and defence policy cooperation: NATO and the EU have the highest priority for Germany while Sweden instead emphasizes bilateral defence cooperation.

Germany's security is closely linked to its allies in NATO and the white paper highlights the defence of the territories of the NATO members as a central security interest. In addition, NATO is the most

important framework for many German bilateral initiatives. By taking the lead as a Framework Nation, Germany is seeking closer relations with other nations that bilaterally integrate forces or capabilities in its armed forces. Germany, moreover, is pressing for deeper EU cooperation on security and defence policy, and sees the EU becoming a security and defence union as a long-term goal. Germany has expressed its support for the creation, together with a core group of countries, of so-called Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the defence sector, with the intention of creating a new foundation for initiatives and cooperation projects that promote capability development in the EU member states.

The Swedish government has emphasized that joining NATO is not an option. The defence minister, Peter Hultqvist, has been clear that an application for membership would have far-reaching consequences for domestic policy, neighbouring Finland and stability in the region. At the same time, Sweden's partnership with NATO has gradually developed, and in 2016 parliament ratified a so-called Host Nation Support agreement, which regulates how NATO members can operate on Swedish territory. Sweden has also expressed doubts about a number of initiatives proposed by Germany in order to strengthen European defence cooperation. The Swedish government currently appears to view the EU as a forum for foreign and security policy cooperation and to a lesser extent as a defence policy tool.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEEPER COOPERATION

A comparison of Germany's and Sweden's new policy documents provides few concrete details on possible areas of cooperation. At the general level, the largely broad language indicates a consensus regarding threats and security. Nonetheless, while these types of documents seldom play a positioning role, they do highlight crucial differences in how the two countries ascribe priority to security policy cooperation.

While the Swedish national security strategy identifies Germany as a vital partner, the German white paper lacks any such description of Sweden. This does not mean, however, that Germany is opposed to bilateral cooperation. In recent years, Germany has initiated military cooperation with a range of states in Europe, such as the Netherlands, Poland, Norway,



the Czech Republic and Romania. From a Swedish perspective, however, the fact that this cooperation primarily occurs in a multilateral context, and mainly within NATO, might be problematic. For Germany, this is an important arena for legitimizing its role as a major power, but is also useful for securing access to a variety of capabilities.

Sweden and Germany share several flaws in military capability. Both countries have been reducing their defence spending for some time and the proposed increases are far from sufficient to remedy the flaws by themselves. Their armed forces lack personnel and materiel. Their units have a low level of readiness and conduct too few exercises. These capability gaps could form a viable basis for cooperation, which could involve operational cooperation in the Baltic Sea or in international missions, and even joint capability development in terms of materiel and exercises.

The prospects for closer cooperation between Germany and Sweden are dependent on developments in Europe and the rest of the world. Several factors – chief among them the result of the “Brexit” negotiations, the evolution of President Trump’s policies, continued Russian actions and the course of events in Europe’s southern neighbourhood – could create a new dynamic in European security and defence cooperation. This could develop in several different directions, for example, from closer cooperation between a limited group of countries, to reinforced bilateral relations or deeper European integration. It is not certain, however, that Sweden and Germany will draw the same conclusions about which form of cooperation best favours their national security.

FURTHER READING

Johan Ellend, Anna Sundberg and Niklas H. Rossbach, *The Russian Wake-up Call to Europe: French, German and British Security Priorities*, 2016, FOI-R--4270--SE.