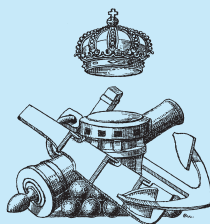


Svenska marinen in NATO: Opportunities and Challenges

By Sebastian Bruns



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Ledamoten
SEBASTIAN BRUNS

Dr. Sebastian Bruns is Senior Researcher at the Institute for Security Policy Kiel University (ISPK), where he served as the founding father of the adjunct Center for Maritime Strategy & Security, 2016-2021. From 2021-2022, he was the inaugural McCain-Fulbright Distinguished Visiting Professor at the United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland (USA). Since 2021, he is also a Senior Associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, DC, and a Corresponding Fellow at Kungl. Örlogsmannasällskapet.

Svenska marinen in NATO: Opportunities and Challenges

Inaugural lecture in Kungl. Örlogsmannasällskapet held in Stockholm on the 24th of August, 2022.

Abstrakt: Dieser Artikel umreißt die Chancen und Herausforderungen, die die Schwedische Marine als wahrscheinliche künftige NATO-Marine erwarten kann. Dabei bieten sich für den Nordatlantikpakt selbst ebenfalls Anknüpfungspunkt, muss das Bündnis doch nach 20 Jahren landzentrierter Heeres- und Spezialkräftekriegführung in Afghanistan seit 2014 – und seit Februar 2022 noch intensiver – einerseits über die klassischen militärischen Aspekte von Landes- und Bündnisverteidigung nachdenken, andererseits aber eben auch die maritimen Fähigkeiten wieder deutlich stärken. Russland ist auf den Randmeeren unterwegs und versucht, insbesondere bei Flugkörpern, Unterseebootoperationen und hybriden Methoden das Bündnis zu stören. Der Ostsee als integraler Teil des Nordflankenraums kommt besondere Bedeutung zu. Schwedische Seemacht in all seinen Ausprägungen und Abstufungen wird ein wichtiger Aspekt in kooperativen Ostseesicherheit sein – auch für die künftigen Partnermarinen.

With its geopolitical, strategic and military changes stemming from Russia's illegal and unjustified war against Ukraine in February, 2022 has the potential to go down in history as a true watershed year. Among many other critical evolutions, the decision by the Swedish government to apply for inclusion into NATO breaks with a long tradition of Scandinavia's most sizable country as a non-aligned nation.¹ It is with much political fanfare that Stockholm and Helsinki are expected to join a somewhat reinvigorated transatlantic alliance that not only finds an old nemesis on its Eastern front, but also renewed American leadership in the post-Donald Trump U.S. presidency. Experts are

1. At the time of writing, NATO member states' parliaments are still in the process of deliberating the Swedish (and Finnish) requests.

particularly looking at the military capabilities that Sweden and Finland, which have long since been as close to NATO as a non-member could be, will bring strategically and politically to the table.² This brief will provide some thoughts around the trifecta of a) what the Swedish Navy will take to NATO, b) what NATO's naval needs shape up to be, and c) identify some overlaps and opportunities.³

Far from needing a pep talk, the Swedish Navy – once Sweden officially joins the North Atlantic Pact – will nonetheless add significantly to NATO's maritime and naval posture. For starters, the Tre Kronor Navy this year celebrated its 500th anniversary. Founded in 1522, it therefore brings to the forefront a very long tradition as a sea power. If one does not follow conventional wisdom, it is not limited to the number of ships, but also the maritime mindset of a country's people. By way of comparison, the German Navy in 2023 will celebrate its 175th anniversary, a much more modest commemoration due to Germany's checkered naval history. Since its post-World War II rebirth, the West-German *Bundesmarine* and its post-Cold War successor *Deutsche Marine* have had laudable successes and, perhaps of interest to students of strategic culture, been fashioned as alliance navies, usually operating internationally under an EU, NATO or UN mandate. This could be another useful approach for Sweden as it seeks to create a mindset that covers both, national and territorial defense as well as alliance defense.

If anything, Sweden's rich naval tradition can help to re-navalize NATO. After all, the alliance is coming off two decades of land-centric counterinsurgency, counterterrorism and state-building operations in Afghanistan, which has created an officer and political-strategic corps of continentally-thinking individuals. While Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and incursion into Eastern Ukraine has begun to change the Alliance's mindset drastically towards more conventional aspects of deterrence and warfighting (NATO's Readiness Action Plan of 2014 and the Warsaw Summit of 2016 helped pave the way, though many elements exist on paper than proven in practice). Still, NATO remains very much culturally dominated by army and air force generals, despite carrying the "North Atlantic" as a huge maritime arena in its name. Given the naval component of the new era's challenges – such as Russian undersea activity, a focus on the Arctic, Baltic, Black, and Mediterranean Seas, but also the increasingly confrontational posture of the Chinese Navy in their Indo-Pacific backyard and beyond – it is high time to focus on the sea-going aspects of alliances security. Sweden can help.

The Swedish Navy brings to the table a wide experience in national and territorial defense at sea and in the protection of commercial shipping, two core naval missions spanning a wide spectrum. Moreover, the Swedish Navy has some experience in multilateral maritime operations such as the EU's counterpiracy mission ATALANTA (2010) and the UNIFIL maritime task force (2006-2007). More recent NATO enlargement rounds would include former Warsaw Pact countries that had little to no joint and combined naval expertise.

2. For a broader and more operational discussion on the military issues, see John R. Deni, *Sweden and Finland are on their way to NATO membership. Here's what needs to happen next.*, Atlantic Council Issue Brief, 22 August 2022.

3. This is based on the author's Royal Swedish Society of Naval Sciences' inaugural lecture, given on 24 August 2022 at the Swedish Maritime Museum, Stockholm.

From a naval perspective, NATO is certainly dominated by the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and France with their large and capable navies. It has been the Royal Navy and the United States Navy that are driving a naval rejuvenation in the Baltic, it must be stated. This is hardly new or surprising, and should empower littoral states to use the respective opportunities.⁴ In addition, potent smaller maritime powers such as Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark are part of the Alliance.⁵ According to Geoffrey Till, noted navalist and sea power expert, the Swedish Navy could be understood as falling right between a type 4 blue-water navy, the lowest in that category, tasked with regional power projection, and the most capable non-blue water navy, a type 5 regional offshore coastal defense navy.⁶

	Rank	Designation	Typical Inventory	Capabilities
BLUEWATER	4	Regional power-projection	Aviation-capable ships (destroyers, frigates), submarines, some support ships	Limited range power projection beyond exclusive economic zone
NON BLUEWATER	5	Regional offshore coastal defense	Smaller ships (frigates, corvettes), no under-way replenishment	Coastal defense within and slightly beyond exclusive economic zone

While such attempts to rank navies should be taken with substantial caution – the risk of comparing apples and oranges is real, even at sea – such conceptual undertakings offer hints at levels of ambition for a navy, as well as their potential to add to the alliance for combined operations. At the same time, as Austrian naval doyen Jeremy Stöhs has pointed out, Western navies face a true dilemma in the accelerating quest for high-end technology and the political, operational and financial costs this incurs on smaller and medium-size navies.⁷ A different angle was offered in 1995 by naval historians Jon Sumida and David Rosenberg, who noted the components of a successful naval strategy, aptly grouped as “5 Ms”. Accordingly, these are:

4. See, for instance, Sebastian Bruns, “From show of force to naval presence, and back again: the U.S. Navy in the Baltic, 1982–2017,” *Defense & Security Analysis, Taylor & Francis Journals*, vol. 35(2), pages 117-132, April 2019; Bruce Stubbs, “US Sea Power has a Role in the Baltic”, *USNI Proceedings*, Vol. 143/9/1,375, September 2017.

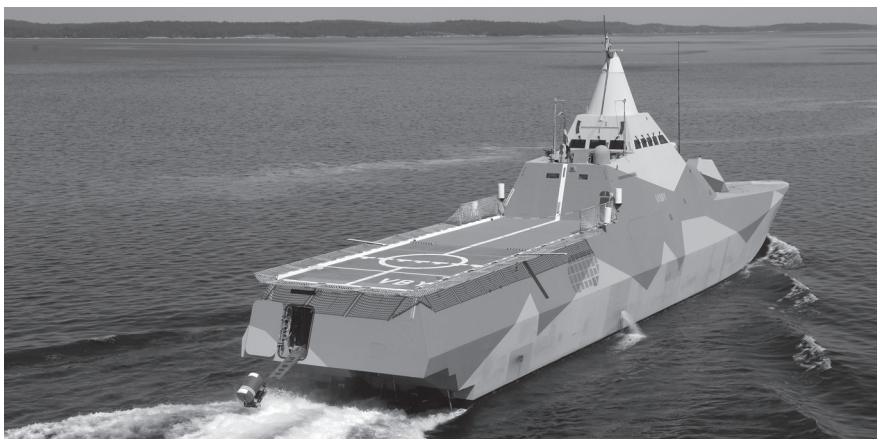
5. For a discussion of the evolution of European naval power since 1990, see Jeremy Stöhs’ study, *The Decline of European Naval Forces. Challenges to Sea Power in an Age of Fiscal Austerity and Political Uncertainty*, USNI Press: Annapolis, MD 2018. Sweden is covered on pp. 161-167.

6. See Geoffrey Till, *Seapower. A Guide for the 21st Century*. 4th edition, Routledge: Milton Park, New York 2018, p.147ff.

7. Jeremy Stöhs, *How High? The Future of European Naval Power and the High-End Challenge*, Center for Military Studies University of Copenhagen, 2021.

- Men (and Women), or the naval personnel;
- Machinery, or the types of ships, aircraft and other vehicles that navies employ;
- Management, or the type of command structure as well as the political framework that shapes a navy's roles and missions;
- Money, or the kind of funding into navies which, at the core, are long-term supply-based financial investments rather than demand-based;
- Manufacturing, or the industrial base in a country to sustain a navy.

In 2000, the late German naval historian Wilfried Stallmann added a sixth “M”: Mentality, or a navy's strategic culture.⁸ A more contemporary and potentially more quantifiable approach would look at the size and nature of the fleet, its geographic reach, its functions and capabilities, its access to high-grade technology, its reputation, and the technological excellence it provides. While an in-depth discussion of these aspects is beyond the scope of this brief, the technological excellence that Sweden can potentially bring to NATO and its navies is worth a closer look.



Minelaying from a Visby Corvette. Photo: Jimmie Adamsson, Swedish Armed Forces.

The Swedish naval technology contribution covers four notable assets:

1. The *Visby-class corvettes* are a sleek and capable class of ships that are optimized for Sweden's rugged coastlines.⁸

Their low radar signature can help “hide” them from enemy sensors. They will provide assets to the Standing NATO Maritime Groups which operate in the Baltic and Northern flank area. Short of hiding in the (Norwegian) fjords like United States Navy aircraft carriers did in line with “The Maritime Strategy” of the 1980s, the Visby corvettes will lend credibility to NATO's littoral components. Last but certainly not least, their very modern design, which one hopes will be continued somewhat in a prospective successor class, slightly larger and even more capable, serves to display the

8. Cited in Sebastian Bruns, *US Naval Strategy and National Security. The Evolution of American Maritime Power*, Routledge: Milton Park, New York 2018, p. 32f.

technological superiority that NATO member states' shipyards can churn out. Navies, which often operate "out of sight, thus out of mind", need to impress upon their peoples their role to create the critical support for such long-term investments. The Baltic Sea, where such ships will often operate in clear view of coastal settlements and thus cameras, twitter users, etc., is a peculiar case for this lesser military, more political-diplomatic role of navies is tested again and again. Short of frigates, corvettes like the Swedish ones could be interesting for other Baltic littoral states that do not yet operate such medium-sized warships.



A CB 90 of latest version. Photo: Swedish Armed Forces.

2. Sweden's *amphibious assault element*, in particular the CB-90 fast boats, which have garnered interest around the Baltic littoral (i.e. in Germany), is another worthwhile contribution to the alliance and the Northern flank.

Amphibious warfare has gained significant momentum in the Baltic Sea, be it through pre-2022 Russian Navy drills or, more recently, allied amphibious elements in the Mare Balticum as part of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) or the US Navy's USS *Kearsarge* (LHD-3) amphibious readiness group repeated visits this past summer.

While the big decks represent the high end of amphibious warfare, Baltic littoral states and NATO will be well advised training and exercising the offensive and defensive small boat operations from the sea as well.



3 & 4. Finally, two technological features that are not yet in the water. First, the future Swedish A-26 *submarine*, an ambitious project for a next-generation undersea capability, is likely to shake up the question for NATO's non-nuclear boat. ThyssenKrupp MarineSystem's (TKMS) air-independent propulsion submarines (type 212A/CD) remain the challenger to be reckoned with as while navies such as that of the Netherlands look for a proper model for their force regeneration. A more competitive market ought to help NATO member states in general, though Saab Kockums has not built an indigenous submarine in more than 25 years. To their enduring credit, Swedish submarines continue to have a high standing in the United States, where the lease of HSwMS *Gotland* (2005-2007) continues to be remembered, though by some more positively than by those who had to contend with the difficulty of finding and hunting the submarine. Another asset that still has to prove its viability is the future HSwMS *Artemis*, a signal intelligence ship that is currently two years overdue amidst the reverberations of the pandemic as well as major hick-ups in this Swedish-Polish joint venture.

Somewhat unrelated to the question that the Swedish government and people will have to answer, namely what kind of navy they need, want and can afford, NATO will gladly welcome and even embrace the Nordic contribution. With its rich partnership with NATO navies, Sweden will be well placed to hit the ground running. NATO navies, whether on individual and national deployments or as part of rotational Standing NATO Maritime Groups (SNMG), are a significant presence in the Baltic Sea. NATO operates two of these standing groups in the Northern European area of operations, a larger surface ship group (SNMG 1, the former Standing Naval Force Atlantic, STANAVFORLNT), and a mine countermeasures group (SNMCMG1, the former Standing NATO Force Channel, or STANAVFORCHAN, and Mine Countermeasures Force North Western Europe, or MCMFORNORTH, respectively) grouped around smaller surface combatants and tenders. The Swedish Navy, upon gaining the operational prowess and formal legitimation to integrate, could dispatch one or more of its warships into the groups. At the same time, exercises such as the annual Baltic Operations (BALTOPS) and Northern Coasts (NoCo) will provide ample opportunity to train with other NATO navies in a joint and combined effort.

Whereas the deployment of larger vessels as part of BALTOPS and beyond is making the usual waves, NATO will likely require the Swedish Navy to account for regular but flexible naval presence as well. This should come as no surprise for the Kingdom given its frontline statues in the Baltic Sea. Sweden will be well advised to provide for a continuous naval presence in peacetime and crisis, and to use every opportunity to work with other NATO navies. A broader mindset, keeping in mind the military, constabulary and diplomatic use of the sea by navies,⁹ should yield a dedicated national naval or maritime strategy that addresses some of the trajectories outlined above. At the time of writing, it remains unclear whether NATO's own "Allied Maritime Strategy", published in 2011, will see a rewriting, the need for which has been addressed in

9. See *Triangle on the Use of the Sea*, based on Ken Booth (1977) and Eric Grove (1990), and vastly expanded, cited in Till, *Seapower*, p. 362.

public forums repeatedly.¹⁰ In light of this, and absent a top-down effort, a bottom-up strategic effort would be very welcome by allied navalists. This ought to include some dedicated investments in the military-intellectual complex as well, given the need to study, research, advise, critique and explain naval matters to counter the infamous, often diagnosed “sea blindness”.

NATO, at least in the Baltic Sea and Northern flank realm, is very much looking for cooperation agreements and a concurring mindset, not necessarily commands. There is much activity in the Baltic Sea in the latter field, and the Swedish military – already likely to be challenged to staff NATO billets around the European and North American – will be stretched to cover both, the staffing and the operational requirements. Germany, for instance, is pushing hard for formats that attempt to offer new command, control and coordination functions in the Baltic Sea area, albeit triggering some envy in other member states and the real risk of over-complicating NATO’s effectiveness in the region.¹¹ The much-advanced Swedish-Finnish naval integration in recent years might offer a unique opportunity for true burden-sharing of two smaller militaries in NATO, and a chance to revive allied pre-2014 pooling and sharing initiatives in a meaningful way.

A word on the proxy discussion whether the Mare Balticum would be turning into a “NATO lake” with the probable accession of Finland and Sweden into the alliance: No. As Hamburg-based Baltic Sea expert Julian Pawlak has rather brilliantly put it,

“Designating the Baltic Sea as a ‘NATO lake’ is fatal in many ways. Besides the fact that, following such logic, it would already have been an ‘EU lake’ for some time, the use of the term suggests that the Baltic could be handled more or less exclusively by NATO, as an inland sea (which it almost is, politically), leading to the subsequent fallacy of complete sea control (which is certainly not the case). It is true that Russia’s denial capabilities and its infamous anti-access/area denial bubbles have been successfully demystified and put into perspective. In addition, the assessment of Russia’s armed forces in light of the current war in Ukraine has changed some previous assumptions. Yet, Russia’s denial capabilities have a purpose and, more significantly, they remain in the region: in Kaliningrad, in Russia’s west and in Belarus. Therefore, it is still possible to hinder the unrestricted maneuverability of NATO forces in the region: perhaps not in the entire Baltic Sea, and perhaps only for a certain period of time – but it is certainly possible.”¹²

Sea strategists know that maritime territory can and will never be controlled in a manner that militaries do on land. In addition, if history is any guide, places such as the

10. See Kiel International Seapower Symposia 2018 (on allied maritime ends), 2019 (on means) and 2021 (on the ways). Reports on each conference can be obtained through www.kielseapowerseries.com. For more in-depth coverage on current issues that should drive an alliance-wide rework of its maritime strategy, see Julian Pawlak/Johannes Peters, *From the North Atlantic to the South China Sea. Allied Maritime Strategy in the 21st Century*, Nomos: Baden-Baden 2021 (=ISPK Seapower Series, Vol. 4).

11. Edward Lucas, *Close to the Wind. Too Many Cooks, Not Enough Broth*, Center for European Policy Action (CEPA), 9 September 2021.

12. Julian Pawlak, *No, Don't Call the Baltic a 'NATO Lake'*, RUSI Commentary, 5 September 2022. For a counter position, see Edward Lucas, *The Baltic Sea Became a Nato Lake*, Finnish Business and Policy Forum – EVA, 27 June 2022.

Mediterranean and the Atlantic have at one point been designated as NATO lakes – until they no longer were, with the incursion of then-Soviet submarines and naval assets in the Cold War, or as recently as a decade ago, by the aspiring Chinese Navy.¹³ Baltic navies would be well advised not to close or cordon off seas, and countries such as Germany have gone a long way to conceptualize that the Baltic Sea is intimately connected to the more contested and to the High Seas of the rest of the globe. Legal and etymological concerns aside, Baltic navies will still have to exercise sea control and all forms of naval warfare on the whole spectrum of conflict. A self-serving description of the Baltic as a “NATO lake” amounts to detrimental whistling in the woods at best, or wishful thinking and the willful degeneration of naval strategic thought and practice at worst.

As this piece has attempted to show, there are a number of opportunities and challenges alike for Swedish accession to NATO – and for the Swedish Navy. This concerns both the national heritage and background as well as international allied dynamics. If anything, Sweden can expect to meet several NATOs.

For instance, the issues NATO Northern flank members face often vastly differs from the concerns of the Eastern front and the countries on the Southern flank. European nations and North American member states bring differing national strategic cultures and world views to the table in Brussels (or other NATO installations), and the last membership extension rounds have created an underlying tension between the Alliance’s classic maritime and even naval powers and the former Warsaw Pact member states, which are often continentally thinking entities. NATO’s focus on land warfare has expedited and deepened this process away from the maritime flanks, which curiously enough encompass $\frac{3}{4}$ of the European peninsula and whereas the Atlantic links the U.S and Canada with Europe. The Swedish Navy can and must play an important role in the Alliance, and should be encouraged to infuse its professionalism and maritime strategic culture into NATO as well as identify partners with which it can aggressively pursue bi- and multilateral programs so that NATO as a whole can be strengthened. Given existing formats, examples could be joining the German-Dutch amphibious cooperation to make it tri-partite, participating in the German-Danish-Polish Multinational Command East (MNC E) in Szczecin (Poland), offering its next-generation light corvettes/ light frigates to partner navies, etc.

The Swedes would, finally, also be well advised to not overstretch and to avoid making the same mistakes as their soon-to-be fellow allies have done with regards to atrophying naval power in favor of a diffuse land power argument. Balancing national and alliance defense with international crises management remains the key challenge of the day for those wearing the uniform with the Tre Kronor.

13. For use of the term “NATO lake”, see Christina Lin, “The Dragon’s Rise in the Great Sea. China’s Strategic Interests in the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean”, in Spyridon N. Litsas, Aristotle Tziampiris *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition: Multipolarity, Politics and Power*, Routledge: London 2015.



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Editor-in-chief: Captain (N) Bo Rask

**Editors address: c/o Rask, Kungl. Örlogsmannasällskapet
Teatergatan 3 1 tr. 111 48 STOCKHOLM,
SWEDEN**

Telephone: +46 76 632 3883, E-mail: editor@koms.se

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Address for the Royal Swedish Society of Naval Sciences:

**Kungl. Örlogsmannasällskapet, Teatergatan 3; 1 tr,
S- 111 48 STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN**

Telephone: + 46 70 299 7095, E-mail: secretary@koms.se

Address for the Society's library:

**Kungl. Örlogsmannasällskapets bibliotek, Amiralitetstorget 7,
S-371 30 KARLSKRONA, SWEDEN**

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