


# Sweden Strengthens NATO's Presence in Europe

*The Swedish Air Force Commander's View on Joining NATO*

By Major General Jonas Wikman, Commander of the Swedish Air Force



“The great strength of an alliance and air power stems from mutual trust and the shared belief that synergies arise when one seeks, without prestige, ways to enhance others’ strengths and compensate for each other’s weaknesses.”

*Welcome to NATO. Although the process took a little longer than planned, it really was a rapid change from the status quo. How did you use the time to prepare for accession into NATO, and what are your priorities as the new Chief of the Air Force?*

Thank you! We have worked hard to be as prepared as possible. These past 18 months have truly been something extraordinary both for the Air Force and for me as Air Chief. First, I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their support. This support has been significant for us and has certainly demonstrated the strength of having allies.

The initial focus for our integration team was to establish and optimize connectivity. More than twenty years of active partnership, participation in numerous exercises, and fruitful bilateral collaborations have contributed to interoperable tactics, techniques, and procedures. We aim for day-zero connectivity to achieve day-zero readiness.

To prioritize and balance the overall workload in the Air Force, we have focused on four lines of effort: current operations, capability development, support to Ukraine, and accession into NATO. The Air Staff and units have collaborated to create synergies between these lines of effort. One notable example is our participation in multilateral combat readiness training alongside our NATO Allies. This multinational approach not only enhances our preparedness but also deepens our understanding of NATO’s procedures and requirements.

The Swedish support for Ukraine has been carefully coordinated with our own capability development. For example, the procurement of AEW&C aircraft S 106 GlobalEye has not only enhanced our own capabilities, but has also allowed us to supply Ukraine with two ASC 890 AEW&C aircraft.

*It’s only been three months since your ratification as a NATO member, but what is your initial impression and what constitutes the most significant changes for Swedish Air Force as a NATO member?*

The great strength of an alliance and air power stems from mutual trust and the shared belief that synergies arise when one seeks, without prestige, ways to enhance others’ strengths and compensate for each other’s weaknesses. I perceive that this attitude prospers within NATO, and it is something I greatly appreciate. We got off to a very good start!

One thing became clear to us early in the process: we needed to adjust our overall concept. Sweden is transitioning from a national doctrine based on a strong defensive capability to absorb an attack and follow up with a counter-offensive. We are now entering an international deterrence and defence context. This marks a significant change in our security policy.

As a member of NATO, it is imperative that we reassess our defensive strategies and adopt a more proactive approach as part of our collective defence concept. We can no longer rely solely on a reactive, bullet-for-bullet approach.

The Swedish Joint Staff is developing a new defence concept based on three core principles: protection, concentration, and effects. These founding principles translate well into the tactical level and our new operational concept for the Air Force.

In the Air Force, our primary goal is to uphold our national excellence as a valued allied partner in support of the joint concept. Our legacy capabilities with operational relevance for the future will be adapted into an allied context. Our capability development will focus on both national and Alliance needs to reach the requirements and assigned capability targets. With the integration into NATO IAMD, our air base concept must be even more resilient. Robust air bases enable extensive deployment of forces for combined air operations to address the military challenges in the north, both from Swedish main operating bases and dispersed airbases.

*Please describe the strengths of the Swedish Air Force and what capabilities you bring to NATO.*


The Swedish Air Force is a modern, well-trained, and adaptable military organization. Our previous policy of non-alignment has shaped our capabilities today,

as we had to rely solely on our own resources and expertise. This led us to develop a diverse set of capabilities that are unmatched by many countries of similar size. However, this self-reliance has also posed challenges for us; as a small nation, we have not been able to invest in specialized capabilities, such as air-to-air refuelling platforms or strategic UAVs. In this regard, joining NATO offers us an exceptional opportunity to address these limitations. By collaborating with other nations and pooling resources, we can combine our existing strengths with those of our new allies.

We embody a warfighting culture, characterized by a can-do spirit that thrives on overcoming challenges. Our Air Force culture is influenced by the asymmetry inherent in our previous policy of non-alignment. Similar to Finland, Sweden was compelled to adapt with doctrinal, conceptual, and technological flexibility in order to meet the existential threat nearby. The innovative solutions we devised were truly groundbreaking, as they were forged under the intense pressure of a complex and demanding operational environment.

Now we all share a challenging operational environment where our bases are no longer the safe havens they used to be. NATO needs to be more agile and become more unpredictable to effectively counter our adversaries. Sweden has a long history of conducting air operations from dispersed bases; in effect we have practiced Agile Combat Employment since 1960. This extensive experience provides valuable insights that can be leveraged in developing future



 © Jesper Sundström/Swedish Air Force

concepts to improve mobility and protection, both of which are essential for NATO's collective defence.

Another key aspect is that our units use conscripts as extensively as possible for a wide range of skilled tasks. This approach allows us to transform young men and women into skilled, multi-capable airmen in a very short period of time. We reinstated conscription in 2017 after a period of dormancy, and the results have been highly successful. After a few months of training, a team consisting of five conscripts and one supervising officer stationed at a remote road base can efficiently execute a tactical turn-around on a Gripen aircraft for air-to-air missions in just 15 minutes.

Our expertise lies in air operations in the High North where darkness, snow, and cold often impact our missions. Rest assured that we are committed to do everything necessary to become as proficient as possible in 360° operations across NATO's entire area of interest. Strong alliances are built on trust and loyalty, and our new Allies can count on the Swedish Air Force.

*As you mentioned earlier, one prioritized capability is air defence. How are you adapting your forces to be a part of NATO's IAMD?*

IAMD, with both its offensive and defensive components, forms the foundation of the Swedish Air Force's future operating concept. With our NATO membership, a shift towards a more offensive posture will be possible, making our air defence more well-rounded.

It starts with connectivity, whether between NATO Allies, other countries, or within our own Armed Forces. I will not be satisfied until we can seamlessly transmit data between any platform in any domain, creating a unified kill-web. We aim to support cross-domain targeting by integrating space-based sensors with surface-based shooters, fostering a multi-domain and multi-national approach. Sweden has the necessary systems that makes this possible. However, the focus must be on coordinating and connecting these systems to form a cohesive network, rather than allowing them to remain isolated.

*With the complex and evolving security landscape, there is growing interest in enhanced regional co-operation. Could you elaborate on how the Swedish Air Force is contributing to the development of the Nordic air power concept, and what benefits do you foresee from this collaboration for regional security in the High North? Please explain how Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) bolsters NATO rather than providing competition?*

I want to emphasize that the Nordic Air Power Concept is in no way an alternative to or a competitor of NATO. We are committed to contribute to NATO's collective defence in the most effective and responsive way possible. The concept gives us the opportunity to operate together before 'day one', and ensure our capabilities are fully integrated within NATO and can be deployed in any direction as needed.



*Technical personnel from the 11<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Company prepare JAS 39s of the Skaraborg Wing for their return flight back to Sâtenäs from Luleå after Exercise Nordic Response.*

The Nordic countries share a common understanding of the military challenges in our region. From both political and military perspectives, there is great consensus on how we can and should address future conflicts in the Nordic region. Geographical conditions, similar strategic cultures, and comparable economic conditions create a natural basis for a common Nordic defence concept.

The Nordic Air Power Concept is in the initial implementation phase, and the Nordic air chiefs have delegated extensive authority to our respective planners. It is crucial that we work expeditiously to keep pace with the current security situation.

NATO membership has removed the invisible barriers that our previous non-alignment and national borders created, allowing our air forces to fully utilize their strategic potential and enhance our contribution to deterrence.

National operational plans and NATO remain the foundation for Nordic joint air operations. The Nordic air forces will achieve the ability to plan and conduct joint air operations as one force, with day-zero readiness. A key component is the establishment of capabilities for distributed command and control.

Nordic cooperation will create synergies in future multi-domain operations. Denmark, Norway, and soon Finland flying low-observable F-35s and deep precision strike capability will combine with Swedish Gripen aircraft featuring state-of-the-art Electronic Warfare (EW) systems, long-range anti-surface missiles, and outstanding availability from dispersed airbases. Our new AEW&C aircraft, the S 106 GlobalEye, serves as the C2 hub that enables multi-domain SA for cross-domain operations and targeting. We have just finalized our Nordic seamless air defence network for radar data exchange. This allows us to share real-time data and it significantly enhances our SA and early warning.

The NORDEFSCO also eases the implementation of new strategic initiatives for defence material procurement. Possible areas of cooperation include tactical airlift, air-to-air refueling aircraft, AEW&C, and advanced

unmanned ISR platforms. These collaborations allow each country to access resources and capabilities that would have been financially out of reach if pursued individually.

### *How is the Swedish Air Force adapting to the rapid changes in the operational and technological landscape?*

Adaptation and innovation are indeed essential for us. We are actively engaged in developing next-generation aircraft, sensors, airbase concepts, and enhancing our space capabilities. However, our pace is too slow. We must reclaim the drive that once marked our air force: the desire to evolve through the power of innovation. Years of missed investments have affected our ability to develop and acquire new technologies. During years of budget cuts and savings, innovation was not rewarded, leading to a stagnation that we must overcome. We must improve our ability to develop new capabilities. This is a matter of great importance to me, and we have several initiatives in the works to stimulate innovation and accelerate development. This will be essential in preparing for the challenges of the future operational environment. We cannot afford to rely on projects that take 15 years to move from conception to capability.

### *Speaking of future projects, could you share insights into any upcoming initiatives in Sweden?*

Our focus is not only on acquiring new aircraft and helicopters, but also on upgrading our existing fleet, such as enhancements in sensors, EW, and weapons technology. We are acquiring new active and passive sensors to replace the ground-based early-warning network with a new sensor grid.

The space and cyber domains are indeed becoming increasingly significant. We are in the process of establishing a more robust cyber defence framework to protect our systems and sensitive information. In terms of space, we are establishing a recognized space picture and exploring satellite technology, aiming to launch our first satellite before the end of 2029.



M Fighter Jets: © Jesper Sundström/Swedish Air Force; Sky: © 1xpert – stock.adobe.com; Flare: © jangnhut – stock.adobe.com

*Swedish Air Force JAS 39s on the flightline at Luleå Air Base, home of the Norrbotten Wing, ready for Exercise Nordic Response 2024.*

Due to the general importance of combat air capabilities, combined with the required resources and long time-scales, Sweden has launched a national concept programme (SWAP) for assessing future solutions for combat air capabilities. The programme will create knowledge necessary to support an informed decision on how to ensure long-term access to combat air capabilities into the 2060s and beyond. While it is too early to discuss specifics about the core platform, current trends point us in a clear direction: Whether we opt to develop or acquire, you will recognize ‘the Swedish DNA’ in our next fighter system. International cooperation will be a necessary part of any future solution, regardless of nominal supply option.

*It will be interesting to follow Sweden’s progress integrating into NATO. Finally, how do the current developments in Ukraine and in the Middle East affect your concept and capability development?*

I follow the Ukrainian armed forces’ fight against Russian aggression with deep admiration. The Ukrainian

military’s ability to conduct both defensive and offensive operations, while simultaneously innovating and adapting, truly astounds me. Our military support to Ukraine is a central part of Swedish defence policy and probably the most important investment we can make in our future security. It is imperative that our support remains robust and sustained over the course of several years.

We are continuously refining our TTPs and developing our CONOPS based on what we see on the battlefield in Ukraine. Our readiness and progress in various aspects, such as implementing our airbase concept and tailoring our Gripen operating concept. Agile employment to our dispersed bases serves to mitigate attacks by ballistic and cruise missiles.

We are enhancing our capabilities in Electronic Attack and Deep Precision Strike to shift our focus from Defensive Counter-Air to include Offensive Counter-Air. However, there is still more work to be done. Our capability to counter attacks that combine both

sophisticated high-end weapon systems and basic, low-cost weapons requires improvement. We must field a range of defensive capabilities, balancing cost, capability, and quantity against diverse threats such as those demonstrated in Ukraine.

Assuming that future wars will be the same as this one is hazardous. One conclusion is clear and obvious to us: the operational environment changes rapidly, demanding constant tactical adaptation and ongoing development throughout a conflict. Innovation and adaptability are core requirements for our future warfighting concept.

Finally, the current situation in the Middle East is a cause for concern, and we are diligently monitoring its developments. One valuable takeaway from recent events is the impressive performance of our western air defence systems. The defensive capabilities demonstrated by Israel and its allies have been nothing short of remarkable. They have effectively handled a

combination of high-end and low-end threats through allied connectivity and effective targeting and sorting. This success indicates that control of the air remains both relevant and feasible. By ensuring our air defence systems are readily available, persistent, multi-domain, and integrated, we can effectively protect against a wide range of threats.

#### *Do you have any final remarks about joining NATO?*

In conclusion, let me re-state how proud I am of the men and women of the Swedish Air Force during this period of rapid change in our mission. I am confident our new allies will appreciate their professionalism and dedication as we our nations continue to learn from one another. Sweden is proud to be NATO's newest member, and we are committed to the goal of peace through cooperation and credible deterrence. It is a fitting celebration to join this historic Alliance on the occasion of its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Thank you all for the warm welcome to the NATO family. ●

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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#### Major General Jonas Wikman

Commander of the Swedish Air Force

Major General Jonas Wikman graduated from the Air Force Flying Training School in 1993 and began his career as a light attack pilot and flight instructor. He transitioned to flying the J-35 Draken and later the JAS 39 Gripen. Throughout his career as a fighter pilot, General Wikman contributed to the development of the man-machine interface for aircrew. He also gained experience in aviation medicine, eventually serving as Head of the Armed Forces Aeromedical Centre. After completing the advanced command course at the Swedish Defence University in 2009, Jonas Wikman served in the Plans and Finance Department of the Defence Staff. In 2012, he became Commanding Officer of the Flight Test Centre in Linköping.

Two years later, he was appointed Chief of Plans in the Joint Force Generation Command. In 2016, Jonas Wikman became the Senior Air Advisor to the NATO Resolute Support Mission in Kabul, Afghanistan. He was subsequently promoted to Brigadier General and appointed Chief of the Joint Materiel and Support Directorate, as well as Assistant Chief of the Joint Force Generation Command. In 2021, he was promoted to Major General and appointed Deputy Chief of Joint Operations where he gained experience during the evacuation operation from Afghanistan and the events surrounding the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. He held this position until assuming his current command in December 2022.