

A SPECIAL FRANCO-SWEDISH RELATIONSHIP SERVING EUROPEAN COOPERATION

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INTRODUCTION

"This State visit reflects our desire, which took shape in 2017, to build a stronger European sovereignty and develop more solid relationships with each Member State in our Europe. The purpose here is to serve not only our mutual interests, obviously, but also a European project that, in the context of the world as a whole, gives us alone a position to protect ourselves and build our future. And this involves considerable effort on our part and the need to find new paths."

These words were spoken by French President Emmanuel Macron in his address to the French community in Sweden.¹ His speech took place in a wider context: the State visit to Sweden between January 30th to 31st, 2024. This was the first time a French president had made an official visit to Sweden since Jacques Chirac. François Mitterrand also made a visit in 1984, as did Raymond Poincaré in 1914. This trip to the Far North was an opportunity for the current President to emphasise the importance of the two countries' many ties. France and Sweden are united by economic, cultural and historical affinities. In a world that has become tense and uncertain with the weakening of the United States of America (USA) and the rise of the BRICS, France and above all the European Union now have an opportunity to strengthen their geopolitical position. And with the European Parliamentary elections in June 2024, the topic of European cooperation will be central to discussions this year. Lastly, with France and Germany constantly divorcing and never seeming to remarry, it would be strategic for France to diversify its partnerships within the Union, and Sweden appears the ideal candidate.

The aim of this paper is to answer the following question: *How would a special relationship between France and Sweden strengthen European cooperation?*

In the first part, we will look at the fact that Europe is divided on the issues of Atlanticism, economic choices and the Franco-German friendship. In the second part, we will consider the possibility of a Franco-Swedish partnership and establish how this could give fresh impetus to European cooperation.

¹ Elysée. (2024, January 30th). [Visite d'État en Suède : première journée à Stockholm](https://www.elysee.fr/en/visite-d-etat-en-suede-premiere-journee-a-stockholm). elysee.fr.

I. A DIVIDED EUROPE

1. ON THE QUESTION OF ATLANTICISM VERSUS SOVEREIGNISM

In Europe, there are two identifiable geopolitical lines: Atlanticism and sovereignty. The former is in the majority and the latter in the minority, mainly driven by France. The idea of European sovereignty or strategic autonomy is a very French vision of European cooperation. It goes back to Charles de Gaulle, who imagined France and European cooperation as a third way, independent of American capitalism and Soviet communism. The aim of this geopolitical strategy is to give Europeans the capacity to act on their own to ensure their security, economy and the development of new technologies.² Since the Gaullist era, the doctrine of strategic autonomy has been the guiding principle of French European policy, more or less. Now, in his speech, Emmanuel Macron championed the idea of strategic autonomy for the Old World in the face of the American and Chinese superpowers. Although France was long alone in promoting this doctrine, the situation has changed since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The European Union (EU) has now become collectively aware of the need to strengthen itself geopolitically. In 2022, the countries of Europe showed unprecedented cooperation by joining forces against Russia *i.e.* applying sanctions, providing humanitarian, military and financial aid to Ukraine, etc.

The question today is: should Europe systematically align itself with the position of the USA, or can it embody an autonomous power? Within the EU, there is a group of virulently Atlanticist countries: the Visegrad group (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Germany and to some extent the countries of Northern Europe. They are ardent defenders of a Western bloc under the aegis of America.³ These countries tend to shy away from strategic autonomy because they fear a move away from American power. They also take a dim view of France's desire for power through this doctrine, which they criticise as a Gaullist projection onto Europe.⁴

Where does Sweden stand in all this? Does the kingdom support the French approach to strategic autonomy? Traditionally, Sweden is not a supporter of the EU. It joined the Union late, in 1995, and did not adopt the euro in its 2003 referendum. The war in Ukraine has rekindled the fear of their large neighbour, Russia, known in Swedish as *rysskräck*: a fear powerful enough to make Sweden join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 2024. This is a historic event, as the Swedes have emerged from 200 years of a policy of non-alliance. Until a few years ago, applying for a membership, was unthinkable for Stockholm, given its attachment to its neutrality and independence.

² Tobelem, B. (2023, April 28th). [Qu'est-ce que l'autonomie stratégique européenne?](#) Touteurope.eu.

³ Rédaction. (2022, May 27th). [L'autonomie stratégique européenne en cinq questions.](#) Vie Publique.

⁴ Robert, A. (2022, June 1st). [L'introuvable souveraineté européenne.](#) Le Monde Diplomatique.

Although Sweden's relationship with the EU is historically ambiguous, it is a pro-European country, especially since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the Swedes are seeking greater cooperation. A study by Sofie Blombäck and Thomas Karv for the SOM Institute at the University of Göteborg shows that Swedes' perception of the EU has become more positive since the war in Ukraine. The study states that in 2021, 52% of Swedes had a favourable attitude towards the EU. By 2022, the figure had risen to 60%: an increase of 8 percent. Blombäck and Karv talk of the “rally around the EU flag” effect.⁵ According to an article on the *Europaportalen* website, this positive attitude towards the EU has also gained ground in the political class. Over the period 2022-2023, there was 72% agreement within the *riksdag*, the Swedish parliament, on European issues. On October 12th, 2023, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson stated that the European Union was Sweden's main foreign policy platform, as it enabled the kingdom to defend its national interests on a global level.⁶

For Sweden, however, strategic autonomy must not come at the expense of NATO and the Western bloc. It is unrealistic today, in the short term, to promote European cooperation by openly excluding NATO. With the Russian threat in Ukraine, all countries without France's defence capability want the protection of the American umbrella. At this stage, however, there is a growing awareness, not only in Sweden but also in other European countries, that NATO is not an absolute guarantee of protection, given the already significant developments in the US, not to mention the prospect of Donald Trump and the Republicans returning to power. In February 2024, the former US President said he would encourage Russia to do whatever they want to any NATO country that does not pay enough towards the alliance's budget.⁷ This statement, not entirely crystal clear, pushes European countries to give more support to NATO, but raises considerable doubt about his intentions: doubt that is not confined to this candidate alone. This position is expressed ambiguously, suggesting that the very existence of the Alliance is being challenged. However, he only criticises Europe's lack of funding for the common budget, implying that it needs to contribute more.

Sweden is open to strengthening defence ties with France because its leaders are aware that the US, with its internal tensions, is no longer a reliable ally. At the press conference between President Macron and Prime Minister Kristersson, the latter stated that France and Sweden share the common vision that the EU guarantees the security of the continent. The Prime Minister also emphasised France's importance for Sweden, which recognises France as a major continental power that influence the construction of tomorrow's Europe. Ulf Kristersson said that if Europe is to successfully compete with the US and Asia, it must develop a greater force for change as a united entity.⁸

⁵ Blombäck, S. & Karv, T. (2023). [Svensk EU-opinion i tider av krig i Europa](#). Göteborgs Universitet.

⁶ Europaportalen. (2024, April 8th). [Sverige i EU](#).

⁷ Sullivan, K. (2024, February 11th). [Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough](#). CNN

⁸ Regeringskansliet. (2024, January 31st). [Pressträff med statsminister Ulf Kristersson och president Emmanuel Macron](#) [Video]. YouTube.

Therefore, we can say that there is a shared ambition about the need for more extensive European cooperation, while preserving links with Washington. This is the view taken by Peter Magnus Nilsson in an article in the newspaper *Dagens Industri*. The journalist thinks it would be strategically beneficial for Sweden to strengthen its cooperation with France. He explains that because of Brexit, Sweden has lost its special European partner. There is still Germany, which has a special relationship with Sweden in the industrial and political spheres. But Nilsson points out that Germany is not reliable, as it already has special relationships with other countries in Europe. German politics is also unpredictable, as it is a federation made up of 16 *Länder*, which have a considerable influence on Berlin's political orientation. Lastly, with the strong possibility of Donald Trump's return to the White House and an overall change in American foreign policy, Sweden and the EU will no longer be able to count on continued American defence. The journalist posits that France is the ideal partner for Stockholm, as it is a European power and is still faithful to its historic vision of an independent Europe.⁹

2. BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

Beyond the divisions between Atlanticists and sovereignists, there is a North-South divide in Europe. There is a somewhat liberal Northern Europe made up of the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Austria, also known as the “Frugal Four”. They are opposed to a too large European budget and are promoting financial orthodoxy. Their vision of Europe tends to be more liberal in terms of economics, and less political. In contrast, Southern Europe, comprising France, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus and Spain, is more supportive of state control. The South differs from the North in that it embodies fiscal laxity and poor economic performance.¹⁰ Germany lies between the two: the country is a fervent advocate of economic austerity policies, but since the Covid 19 crisis, Berlin has grasped the importance of recovery plans for the European economy.

The informal alliance of the Northern countries was demonstrated during the negotiations for rolling out the €750 billion financial aid package during the Covid 19 epidemic. Differences emerged between the two ideological camps over debt pooling. The Northern countries were reluctant to finance the economic recovery plans for the Southern countries hardest hit by the virus.¹¹ They criticised the practice of stimulating the economy through government debt and advocated austerity reforms in the economics of the South.¹²

Given that Sweden belongs to the Northern countries and France to Southern group, the idea of a rapprochement within the framework of European cooperation seems paradoxical. But despite the structural differences between Sweden and France, Sweden sees France as a special partner in Europe. The war in Ukraine and the ensuing tensions with Russia in the Baltic Sea, the consequences of Brexit, the weakening German economy and

⁹ Nilsson, P. (2024, February 7th). [Macron har uppgraderat Sverige och det behöver vi med](#). Dagens Industri.

¹⁰ Lefebvre. M. (2019, December 30th). [L'Union européenne désunie: les fractures Nord-Sud et Est-Ouest](#). Vie Publique.

¹¹ RTS. (2020, April 8th). [Entre nord et sud de l'Europe, « une discussion stéréotypée insupportable](#). rts.ch.

¹² Toute l'Europe. (2020, July 21st). [Qui sont les pays dits frugaux?](#)

the potential return of Donald Trump to the White House are all events driving Stockholm into the arms of Paris. In today's totally restructured world, anything is possible – as witness the fact that Sweden has done an about-turn regarding NATO.

3. THE FRANCO-GERMAN RELATIONSHIP IS LOSING MOMENTUM

Another rift dividing the Old World is the divorce between France and Germany. Over the past few years, since the departure of Angela Merkel and the start of the war in Ukraine, relations between Paris and Berlin have cooled. A report by the French Senate in 2018, "*France and Germany: where does cooperation stand on the 56th anniversary of the Élysée Treaty?*", already referred the two countries' disenchantment with each other. Today, their cooperation has become mundane, as have the personal relations between the leaders: virtually non-existent since Olaf Scholz came to power.¹³ For aside from their coolness on a personal level, Emmanuel Macron and Olaf Scholz have strategic differences on energy, budgetary and European defence issues. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Germany has undergone major upheavals in the spheres of economics, energy and security. The war has disrupted the German model, organised around the automotive, mechanical engineering, chemical and electrical industries. All this industry benefited from cheap Russian energy and was focused on exports to China. Now the upheaval in world geopolitics has forced Berlin to strengthen its partnerships in Eastern Europe and with the US, without neglecting China, with which Berlin still maintains important economic links. As recently as April 2024, Olaf Scholz visited his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping to celebrate the economic ties between the two countries.¹⁴ As a result, since the start of the war in Ukraine, the Germans have been rearming and opting for Atlanticism rather than strategic autonomy. Berlin has launched a programme to equip its army, with an annual military spending target of €100 billion. In this context, Germany chose to buy 35 American F-35 fighter jets rather than support the European defence industry by buying French Rafale F4 or Swedish Saab JAS 39 Gripen aircraft, for example.¹⁵ Germany also recently decided to work with the UK on the development of a new artillery system, despite Brexit.¹⁶ And the Germans always take a dim view of the gap between French and German public spending. In 2022, France had a public debt of €3,000 billion and an all-time record trade deficit of €164 billion.¹⁷ In Berlin's view, France's inability to get its public spending in order is undermining its credibility.

¹³ [France-Allemagne: quelle coopération à l'heure du 56ème anniversaire du Traité de l'Élysée?](#) (2018, December 6th). Sénat.

¹⁴ Wieder, T. (2024, April 13th). [Face à la Chine, l'Allemagne continue de préférer le rapprochement à l'affrontement](#). Le Monde.fr.

¹⁵ L'AFP. (2022, December 14th). [Allemagne: l'achat de chasseurs F-35 américains est confirmé](#). Le Temps.

¹⁶ Alipour, N. (2024, April 25th). [Malgré les désaccords, l'Allemagne et le Royaume-Uni renforcent leur collaboration militaire](#). [www.euractiv.fr](#).

¹⁷ Le Mitouard, C. Wright, G. [France-Allemagne : la fin du moteur franco-allemand ?](#) (2023, May 9th). Institut Montaigne.

Given the deteriorating relationship between France and Germany, the development of Franco-Swedish relations would seem the perfect solution for reinvigorating European cooperation and enabling France to make its mark in this respect. With Sweden, France has an opportunity to diversify its partnerships and break out of the German impasse. For many years, Berlin has been conducting an *Ostpolitik*,¹⁸ and has established itself as the main protagonist in East-West relations in Europe. France has the opportunity to do the same thing, but in Northern Europe. Closer cooperation with Paris would also be a boon for Stockholm, and enhance its importance within the EU by making its voice heard in the "big players' club". It should be stressed that Franco-Swedish cooperation would not jeopardise the Franco-German partnership. On the contrary, it could give it a boost by complementing it. Sweden could act as a third partner. In periods of crisis, Stockholm could act as a mediator between Paris and Berlin, because the Swedes have historically been both Germanophiles and Francophiles. This would avoid blockages and advance European cooperation in the context of tensions between Germany and France. Meanwhile, in periods of unity, it is easier to assert a position within the EU with three rather than two.

¹⁸ Larousse defines Ostpolitik as West Germany's policy of rapprochement with Eastern Europe and the German Democratic Republic (GDR), implemented by Chancellor Willy Brandt starting in 1969.

II. A FRANCO-SWEDISH FRIENDSHIP

1. THE HISTORICAL LINKS BETWEEN FRANCE AND SWEDEN

As we mentioned earlier, the Franco-Swedish relationship is a longstanding one. It has even been described as a "millennial friendship". It dates back to the 13th century, when the French architect Estienne de Bonneuil helped to build Uppsala Cathedral. When the Thirty Years' War ravaged Europe, Cardinal de Richelieu, Louis XIII's chief minister, formed an alliance with Axel Oxenstierna's Protestant Sweden. Gustaf III, a considerable Francophile, founded the Swedish Academy in 1786 on the model of the Académie Française. There have also been strong romantic links between the two countries throughout history. Rumour had it that the Swedish nobleman Axel Von Fersen was Marie-Antoinette's lover. He certainly played an active role in the royal family's attempted escape to Varennes in June 1791. More recently, the Swedish journalist Christina Forsne had a liaison with President François Mitterrand¹⁹. During Emmanuel Macron's visit, the royal family emphasised on its website that relations between the two countries are excellent, long-standing and multi-faceted.²⁰ Sweden's royal family, whose current sovereign is Karl XVI Gustaf, have a special affection for France as it is the country of their ancestor, Napoleon's marshal Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte, born in Pau. The king at the time, Karl XIII, had no heirs and Bernadotte was chosen to succeed him. In 1818, he became King of Sweden as Karl XIV Johan.²¹

The links between France and Sweden are also seen in the longstanding Francophilia of Sweden's elite. In August 1944, the Swedish Consul General in Paris, Raoul Nordling, persuaded the German General Dietrich von Choltitz not to carry out Hitler's orders to burn Paris. Hence the famous question the Führer asked his general: "Is Paris burning?"²² In France, there is a fascination with Sweden's social and economic model. Its gender equality, welfare state, employment rate, high standard of living, public services and pension system are regularly cited as exemplary. France's admiration of Sweden was illustrated in 2014, for example, when Sweden's former foreign minister, Margot Wallström, was awarded the Légion d'Honneur for her contribution to Europe and her dedication to Franco-Swedish relations.²³ The fascination is mutual, as the Swedes are passionate about French history, language and culture. According to the Swedish Embassy in France, one of the most popular destinations for Swedish tourists is France, with over 400,000 travellers each year. France is the main host country for Swedish Erasmus students. Paris is also home to the only international branch of the *Svenska Institutet*, the Swedish Institute. This shows how important Stockholm considers cultural exchanges between the two countries. France

¹⁹Vermauw, A. (2024, January 22nd). [Emmanuel Macron en Suède: quels rapports bilatéraux franco-suédois?](#) Institut D'Études de Géopolitique Appliquée.

²⁰Kungahuset. [Statsbesök från Frankrike](#). (2024, January 10th).

²¹Regentlängd. [Kungliga Slotten](#).

²²Le Monde Diplomatique. (2020, May 7th). [Le rôle historique de M. Raoul Nordling, consul général de Suède, dans la libération de Paris](#).

²³Ambassade de France en Suède. (2018, December 22nd). [Margot Wallström utnämnd till kommendör av Franska hederslegionen](#). La France En Suède.

is also a key partner in economic terms. There are over 500 Swedish companies employing 95,000 people in France. Meanwhile, 400 French companies have set up in Sweden.²⁴ So the ties between the two countries are multiple and historic.

2. CONVERGING INTERESTS TODAY

Given the indubitable historic ties between France and Sweden, the next question is what they could lead to, now and in the future. It is clear that there are converging interests and real potential for development. During his visit, Emmanuel Macron and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson co-wrote an article in *Dagens Nyheter* entitled "*Nu stärker vi banden mellan Frankrike och Sverige*" ("Let us strengthen the ties between France and Sweden"). We will now take a closer look at these flourishing relations.

As mentioned previously, the economic links are very solid. The website of the French Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty indicates that France is Sweden's 9th biggest partner in the exchange of goods, with a sizable trade in mechanical equipment, electronics, IT, transport equipment, chemicals and pharmaceuticals.²⁵ France is the European country that attracts the most direct investment from Sweden; 70,000 Swedes work for French companies, and digital technologies and finance are strong sectors in both countries. Swedish companies like Securitas, Volvo, Ikea and H&M are also well-established in France. In Sweden, French companies mainly operate in the service sector. During the State visit in 2024, 20-odd agreements between France and Sweden were signed, involving ministries, authorities, institutions and companies. The bilateral relationship was consolidated in 2017 when the Franco-Swedish partnership for innovation and green solutions was signed in the port city of Göteborg.²⁶ Economic cooperation between the two countries could mutually boost their competitiveness in strategic sectors where the EU needs to assert its autonomy. Space, for example: an agreement on space cooperation was signed during the President's visit to Sweden. It is worth noting that Sweden and France are the only European countries that can send satellites into space from their own soil, with the French base in French Guiana and the Swedish base at Kiruna in Lapland.²⁷

Defence is another sector in which France and Sweden are developing partnerships. Sweden has a powerful defence industry, ranking 13th in the world in terms of arms production.²⁸ This is the result of a neutrality and independence policy lasting 200 years. Neutrality is not necessarily synonymous with pacifism and anti-militarism. To be able to maintain a policy of non-alliance for so long, Sweden needed to develop an arms industry to ensure its own security. Emmanuel Macron has clearly grasped the strategic importance of the Swedish defence industry for European sovereignty, and during his visit he expressed his wish to develop military

²⁴ Regeringen. [Frankrike](#).

²⁵ Direction générale du Trésor. (2022, March 31st). [Relations économiques bilatérales - SUÈDE](#)

²⁶ Regeringen och Regeringskansliet. (2024, March 4th). [Frankrike. Regeringskansliet](#).

²⁷ [Sverige och Frankrike tecknar fördjupat rymdsamarbete](#). Rymdstyrelsen.

²⁸ Fougères, P. (2024, March 7th). [Suède: la montée en puissance de son industrie de l'armement](#). Capital (6)

partnerships.²⁹ As a result, a new agreement between Saab and MBDA was signed on 31 January 2024 on bilateral cooperation in the field of anti-tank and anti-aircraft defence.³⁰

Nuclear power is another strategic area in which France and Sweden have developed their partnership. In December 2023, the French and Swedish energy ministers, Agnès Pannier-Runacher and Ebba Bush, signed a letter of intent on the construction of nuclear reactors in Sweden. Sweden aims to revive its nuclear industry and is calling on EDF's French expertise in this area.³¹ In addition, on January 31st, 2024, the Minister for Education, Mats Persson, and the French Minister for Higher Education and Research, Sylvie Retailleau, signed a letter of intent on closer cooperation in nuclear research.³²

Similarly, cooperation between the two countries has been taken a step further in security. On March 4th, 2024, Gérald Darmanin, the French Minister of the Interior, and Gunnar Strömmer, the Swedish Minister of Justice, signed an agreement on cooperation in the fight against organised crime and drug trafficking, designed to promote information exchanges between the Swedish and French authorities.³³

The Swedes also attach great importance to environmental protection, sustainable development and ecology. Environmental campaigner Greta Thunberg is Swedish, and it was in Stockholm, in 1972, that the first international conference on the environment was staged with the UN member countries. The agreement signed between Paris and Stockholm on innovation and green technologies in 2017 and renewed in 2024 illustrates their desire to work together on environmental issues. The two countries are keen to join forces to develop energy systems independent of fossil fuels. The aim is to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050.³⁴

We will conclude with the linguistic and cultural links that unite the two nations. Just over 10,000 French people live in Sweden and over 30,000 Swedes live in France. These two communities help to raise the profile of their respective countries in their host countries.³⁵ As mentioned above, the Swedish Institute has been based in Paris since 1971, with the aim of promoting Franco-Swedish cultural links.³⁶ On January 30th 2024, a cooperation agreement was signed between the French Institute and the Swedish Institute, laying down the first official

²⁹ Szumski, C. & Lemaire, C. (2024, January 31st). [Dans un contexte « d'Europe souveraine », la Suède et la France renforcent leurs partenariats militaires](#). Euractive.fr

³⁰ [Saab och MBDA stärker sitt samarbete](#). (2024, January 31st).

³¹ Messad, P. & Messad, P. (2023, December 19th). [Nucléaire : la Suède et la France renforcent leur coopération](#). euractiv.fr.

³² Regeringen och Regeringskansliet. (2024, January 31st). [Sverige och Frankrike stärker samarbetet inom forskning om kärnkraftsteknik](#). Regeringskansliet.

³³ Nyheter, S. (2024, March 4th). [Sverige och Frankrike ska samarbeta mot gängkriminella](#). SVT Nyheter.

³⁴ Macron, E. (2024, January 30th). Opinion | [Macron-Kristersson: la France et la Suède renouvellent leur partenariat stratégique](#). Les Echos.

³⁵ Elysée. (2024, January 30th). [Déclaration conjointe du Président Emmanuel Macron et du roi suédois Carl XVI Gustaf](#). [Vidéo]. YouTube.

³⁶ Svenska institutet. (2023, September 11th). [Svenska institutet Paris - Svenska institutet](#). Svenska Institutet.

framework for cultural partnerships between the two countries.³⁷ This linguistic and cultural cooperation takes concrete form in the field of education: there is a Swedish section at the Lycée International de Saint Germain-en-Laye, and French is taught at the Lycée Français Saint-Louis in Stockholm. As we know, France is the main host country for Swedish Erasmus students. Historically, French has always been a popular language in Sweden. According to statistics, 6% of Swedish vocabulary is borrowed from French. For example, the word "trottoir" (pavement) gave rise to *trottoar*; "restaurant" became *restaurang* and "affiche" (poster) *affisch*. The same goes for French, which contains words from Swedish dating back to the Viking invasions of Normandy in the 900s. The word "vague" (wave) comes from the Swedish *våg*, "flotte" (fleet) from *flotta* and "crabe" (crab) from *krabba*.³⁸ It is worth pointing out that French, along with German and English, is one of the three working languages used within the European Commission and the Permanent Representatives Committee. French is also the language of deliberation in the European Community court system. The judgments and opinions of the Court of Justice of the European Communities and the Court of First Instance are issued in French. Many Swedes are aware of how important it is to speak French. Firstly because of its dominant position within the European institutions, but also because of its status as the fourth international language, with 220 million French speakers around the world. This awareness is illustrated by Mikael Parkvall's article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, in which he champions the idea that learning French should be revived because, given the exponential growth of the African population, the French-speaking world has a rightful place in Sweden.³⁹ In 2018, the National Board of School Education (*Skolverket*) published a report highlighting the need for a national strategy to revive language learning in schools.⁴⁰ However, over the last few decades, Swedes have somewhat abandoned French in favour of English and Spanish. English because of its status as an international language, and Spanish because of its status as a holiday language, as Spain is a popular tourist destination for Scandinavians. Under 10% of people in Sweden, Denmark and Finland speak French.⁴¹ An article in the *Göteborgs Posten* also reports on the decline of French language teaching in Sweden. In 2021, only 18% of pupils in Year 7 studied the language of Molière. This decline is due to the growing shortage of French teachers in the country. The attractiveness of French needs a boost in Sweden, and this could be one of the key approaches in a Franco-Swedish cooperation.⁴²

³⁷ Lecocq, L. (2024, February 1st). [Undertecknande av avtal mellan Svenska Institutet och Franska Institutet](#). Institut Français de Suède.

³⁸ [Alla svenskar talar franska - även om de inte vet det](#). (2011, March 9th). Aftonbladet.

³⁹ Parkvall, M. (2018, March 7th). [Världsspråket som försvann från den svenska skolan](#). SvD.se.

⁴⁰ Skolverket. (2018, May 30th). [Redovisning av uppdrag om förändringar av nationella program i gymnasieskolan samt av förslag utifrån propositionen Ökade möjligheter till grundläggande behörighet på yrkesprogram och ett estetiskt ämne i alla nationella program](#).

⁴¹ [Francophilie et francophonie en Suède](#). (2021, December 10th). Francophonie Sans Frontières.

⁴² Pihl, K. [Tragiskt att ingen längre vill läsa franska och tyska](#). (2022, May 28th). Göteborgs-Posten.

3. A MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL POLITICAL COOPERATION

Franco-Swedish political cooperation already exists, but both countries would benefit from strengthening it and making it a long-term project. So here is a summary of the beneficial aspects.

As indicated above, there is a division in Europe between the countries of the North and South. Sweden, categorised as a Northern country, could join forces with France and support it in negotiations at European level. Especially when it comes to convincing the Northern countries and the "smaller" countries. This is because Europe's "smaller" countries are often sceptical of French leadership, which they sometimes see as a constraint. In return, France could support Sweden's position and help to make it heard by the Southern countries and the "big" EU countries. The structural differences between the two nations should be seen as an asset rather than a hindrance to Franco-Swedish cooperation.

We emphasise the genuine enthusiasm for greater cooperation with France shown by the Swedes during Emmanuel Macron's visit. The two countries share a fundamental vision, whereby the EU becomes autonomous in areas like industry, energy and security.⁴³

Apart from the principle of cooperation in itself, the time is ripe for making it a reality. Firstly, Sweden has been looking for a new partner within the EU since Brexit and the loss of its close relationship with London, with whom it shared common positions on free trade. Secondly, Sweden has an opportunity to be the third partner in a Franco-German partnership that is losing momentum. As well as being Francophiles, the Swedes are also Germanophiles. Bringing in a third partner would make it possible to diversify and revive European cooperation. Thirdly, Germany is currently in a weak position economically. Its industry is struggling as a result of global geopolitical tensions, rising energy prices and high inflation, which means that Sweden's position as Germany's special partner is objectively no longer a given. Fourthly, Sweden has just joined NATO to bolster its security against its Russian neighbour. However, the country is realistic and aware that American support is by no means certain, leading Stockholm to champion a strong and above all autonomous Europe in terms of defence. This naturally points to a closer partnership with France.

⁴³ [Ledare: Språket hinder för mer tätare samarbete med Frankrike](#). (2024, January 31st). Mariestads-Tidningen.

4. POSSIBLE OBSTACLES TO FRANCO-SWEDISH COOPERATION

Although a special cooperation between France and Sweden seems entirely feasible, it is important to be aware of certain aspects that could impede it.

First of all, their cultural differences must not be underestimated. Sweden may be in the West and in Europe, but its geography, history and culture set it apart from France. Sweden is a Scandinavian, Lutheran Protestant country, while France is a continental country with a Latin, Catholic history. This cultural specificity affects the way Swedes perceive things. In particular, they have a more pragmatic and informal view of politics, business and international affairs. In Sweden, for example, people use the informal form of “you”, even with the Prime Minister. The use of the formal form of address was banned in the 1960s as too formal and rigid. Swedish culture is also less hierarchical than in France. An unwritten law, *Jantelagen*, or the Law of Jante, dictates Swedish social behaviour in all spheres of society. According to this law, people should not try to be different or think they are better than everyone else, as illustrated by the Swedish proverb *Lagom är bäst*: “Moderation is the finest virtue.” In addition, the Swedes stand out for their culture of pragmatism, compromise and respect for the law. Another distinctive point is that Swedish society has long been culturally and ethnically homogeneous. In the 20th century, 90% of Swedes were Lutheran Protestants.⁴⁴ However, this has changed over the last few decades, with the large numbers of immigrants arriving from the Middle East and Africa.

As we said at the start of our study, Sweden's relationship with Europe has evolved over time. Traditionally, Swedes have always been wary of foreign neighbours. Sweden only joined the EU in 1995. The same applies to NATO: Sweden never wanted to fully join the organisation until Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. We can thus say that joining NATO arose more from circumstances than a sincere and deep-seated desire. This scepticism about becoming actively involved in international organisations is therefore a factor to be aware of.

Sweden is a country that looks to France, but over the last few decades it has looked above all to Germany and the English-speaking world. The proof is that the kingdom's second language is English, and Stockholm has abandoned its principle of non-alliance to join an Anglo-American dominated organisation, NATO. Furthermore, a large part of the Swedish manufacturing industry has close links with Germany, with which Sweden shares an export-oriented industry. Germany is still one of Sweden's main trading partners, and is home to 1,500 Swedish companies.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, as we have seen, France is playing an increasingly important role not only in Swedish security policy, but also as a country that is shaping the EU's future through its initiative, ability to influence opinion and ambition to forge alliances.

⁴⁴ Fernandez, D. (2010, February 3rd). [Géopolitique de la Suède](#). Diploweb.com

⁴⁵ Regeringen och Regeringskansliet. (2024, March 20th). [Tyskland](#). Regeringskansliet.

CONCLUSION

To conclude: in this paper we have analysed how a Franco-Swedish partnership is desirable and possible for relaunching European cooperation. Below, we propose a few ideas on how to achieve this.

Continuing and strengthening their partnership in security, and especially in the fight against terrorism. France and Sweden have both been the victims of terrorist attacks in recent years. In France we have the terrible memory of 2015, and in Sweden that of 2017 with the truck attack in Stockholm. In the realm of security, Sweden is also facing problems with gangs and drug trafficking. According to *Brottsförebyggande rådet* (the Swedish national council for crime prevention), Sweden was at the bottom of the list for fatal gun violence in Europe in 2000, but has seen a tragic turn in its fortunes, topping the list since 2018.⁴⁶ These are relatively new crime phenomena for Sweden. Here France could contribute its expertise and experience in the fields of counter-terrorism and the fight against trafficking.

Continuing and strengthening their partnership in the defence industry. France and Sweden are two countries with major defence industries. It would thus be only natural to boost their cooperation – especially given the geopolitical developments throughout the world, and the fact that Europe has the opportunity to develop strategic autonomy or even independence in this sector.

Continuing and strengthening their partnership in the space industry. Agreements have already been signed on this subject, but we stress how significant the potential for cooperation is. The only two bases capable of sending satellites into space in Europe are in France and Sweden.

Building a partnership in the nuclear sector. Sweden is aiming to relaunch its nuclear production and boost its energy independence. Nuclear power is thus a key area for cooperation, given that France's nuclear expertise is unrivalled in Europe. This area is also vital to Europe's independence, a need that has been exacerbated by the problems and high cost of energy supplies since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022. Letters of intent had already been signed between France and Sweden in 2023, and now it is time to make this an actual partnership.

Continuing and strengthening their partnership in new digital technologies. Sweden is a forward-thinking country with expertise in this field, and many new technology companies have been founded by Swedes, including Spotify, Skype and Ericsson. In addition, at the press conference with Emmanuel Macron, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said he wanted to develop European technological independence, which dovetails with France's ambitions for European sovereignty.

⁴⁶ SVT Nyheter. (2021, May 26th). [Sveriges dödsskjutningar i topp i Europa. SVT Nyheter.](#)

Continuing and strengthening their partnership in culture, education and languages. We have noted a decline in the study of French in Sweden, partly due to the lack of teachers. But there is a growing awareness of the geopolitical importance of French. Therefore, the French government could roll out programmes designed to enhance the attractiveness of the French language and culture in Sweden. There is also an urgent need to set up and expand specific exchange and training programmes to strengthen the French teaching corps, now in serious decline in Sweden. One way forward would be to develop educational cooperation based on the Franco-German model. In practical terms, this means setting up partnerships between schools, between academies and between regions, creating joint degrees and exchanges of students, researchers and teachers. Anne L'Huillier, the fifth woman to win the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2023, is French-Swedish!

An opportunity to be seized with both hands. This is because the times and the way events have played out favour close cooperation. The consequences of Brexit, Germany's decline, the US elections and the war in Ukraine all point towards the benefits of a Franco-Swedish partnership. It is strategically important to exploit it in the context of developing an autonomous Europe. France and Sweden are in a position to join forces with a common goal: a political vision of a sovereign Europe.

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