SWEDEN'S LESSONS FOR EAST ASIA: WHY JAPAN AND SOUTH KOREA SHOULD LOOK TO STOCKHOLM IN A DUAL CONTINGENCY

by

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As tensions intensify across East Asia, the probability of a dual contingency—a Chinese invasion of Taiwan alongside a North Korean assault on South Korea—can no longer be dismissed as hypothetical. For U.S. allies Japan and South Korea, the challenge is how to prepare for simultaneous high-end conflicts without becoming strategically overstretched. One overlooked source of inspiration lies far from the Pacific: Sweden.

Sweden's recent NATO accession and its long tradition of Total Defense offer valuable lessons on resilience, deterrence, and multinational cooperation. Just as Sweden built capacity to withstand a Russian crisis while supporting allies, Japan and South Korea can adapt certain practices to deal with a dual East Asian contingency. Moreover, Seoul has an untapped opportunity to expand security cooperation with Sweden—an advanced defense actor whose experience in the Baltic holds direct relevance for Northeast Asia.

Lessons from Sweden for East Asia

South Korea already conducts nationwide civil defense drills, and Japan maintains the J-Alert system, but Sweden offers distinctive advantages in how it embeds preparedness into society. Unlike in East Asia, where exercises can feel routine or narrowly focused, Sweden's Civil Contingencies Agency ensures that crisis guidance is distributed to every household, with detailed instructions on food, water, communications, and shelter.

The emphasis is not only on government-led drills but also on cultivating a culture of individual responsibility and local-level resilience. This Swedish approach could complement existing systems in Japan and South Korea by broadening preparedness beyond alerts and centralized exercises to household-level readiness and sustained public education.

On the military side, South Korea already maintains a significant home front reserve force, while Japan has limited but growing auxiliary capabilities. What Sweden adds is the model of its Home Guard: lightly armed, locally rooted units that specialize in guarding infrastructure such as ports, power lines, transport hubs, and communication networks. The Home Guard is tightly integrated into national defense planning, trained regularly, and able to mobilize quickly for infrastructure defense while conventional forces concentrate on frontline tasks.

For South Korea, where reservists often focus on reinforcing frontline brigades, a shift toward Sweden's system could mean assigning portions of the reserve exclusively to infrastructure protection, cyber-physical security, and territorial denial operations in urban or coastal areas. Japan, too, could adapt this approach to enhance resilience around bases and critical facilities.

Sweden's pre-NATO practice of developing Host Nation Support arrangements also holds lessons. Japan and South Korea have already made progress in codifying legal and logistical mechanisms to host U.S. reinforcements, but the Swedish example underlines the importance of rehearsing these plans regularly and simplifying bureaucratic clearance. Similarly, Sweden's involvement in the Joint Expeditionary Force demonstrates how small, mission-specific coalitions can plug into larger frameworks. East Asian allies could borrow this concept by preparing ad hoc multinational naval or air groups tailored to anti-submarine warfare or mine clearance.

Electronic warfare and counter-drone resilience represent another important area of convergence. Sweden has long recognized the importance of mobility and survivability in the electromagnetic spectrum, investing in systems designed to reduce vulnerability to adversary targeting. Recent procurement of the Lockheed Martin TPY-4 radar, available in mobile configurations, highlights Stockholm's emphasis on radars that can be relocated

and dispersed to complicate enemy strikes. Sweden has also continued to upgrade the electronic warfare payloads on its JAS 39 Gripen fighters, drawing lessons from Russia's intensive use of spectrum warfare in Ukraine. These measures reflect a broader Swedish approach that stresses agility, redundancy, and the avoidance of static, easily targetable nodes.

Japan and South Korea are already moving in parallel directions—Tokyo with its investments in counter-UAS technologies and advanced early-warning radars, and Seoul with its growing portfolio of mobile radar units and counter-drone defenses. Yet Sweden's example underscores the operational benefits of integrating mobility and dispersal into doctrine. While Japan and South Korea primarily focus on strengthening sensor coverage and air-defense layers, Sweden emphasizes how those assets are deployed and managed: through relocation, dispersion, and spectrum discipline. Although Sweden's doctrinal publications remain limited, its recent acquisitions and training patterns suggest a deliberate strategy of enhancing survivability by reducing electromagnetic signatures and denying adversaries predictable targets.

For East Asia's front-line states, this lesson is particularly relevant. China and North Korea have both invested heavily in electronic attack capabilities and precision missile systems designed to blind or suppress allied radars early in a conflict. Adopting Swedish-style practices—training to relocate radars rapidly, dispersing them across redundant sites, and enforcing tighter emission control protocols—could complement Japan and South Korea's existing counter-drone and sensor programs.

By pairing their current hardware investments with operational concepts that prioritize mobility and spectrum discipline, Tokyo and Seoul would significantly increase the resilience of their sensor networks in the opening stages of a dual contingency.

Finally, Sweden's integration into NATO has underscored the reality of global stockpile competition. Japan and South Korea have already begun expanding munitions production and reserves, but the European experience shows the importance of establishing pre-arranged stockpile agreements to prevent sudden shortfalls during simultaneous crises in Europe and Asia. This requires close coordination with the United States, but also potentially with European partners.

South Korea and Sweden: Building a New Security Link

While Japan has well-established ties with NATO, South Korea's cooperation with Sweden remains underdeveloped. While South Korea increasingly participates in dialogues on Indo-Pacific security through frameworks like NATO's ITPP, there is no public evidence of direct consultations with Nordic countries—such as Sweden—on issues spanning both Indo-Pacific and Arctic security in 2023. Nevertheless, both countries face revisionist neighbors, rely on high-tech defense industries, and share commitments to a liberal security order. There have already been promising steps. Sweden and South Korea have engaged in dialogues under NATO's partnership frameworks, and Swedish defense companies such as Saab have participated in defense exhibitions in Seoul, exploring potential collaboration in aerospace, radar, and counter-drone systems.

To move this forward, cooperation can be understood in three layers of feasibility:

In the short term, Seoul and Stockholm could launch a civil-defense memorandum of understanding focused on crisis communication and household resilience. They might also hold joint counter-drone exercises and technology trials, since both sides already prioritize this area. Cold-weather and electronic warfare training exchanges, as well as continued defense-industry engagement through exhibitions and joint projects, could likewise be implemented quickly.

In the medium term, South Korea could restructure part of its reserve force to resemble Sweden's Home Guard by assigning units specifically to infrastructure defense and territorial denial. Joint crisis wargames alternating between Seoul and Stockholm could be developed within NATO partner frameworks. Cooperation on critical minerals—drawing on

Sweden's rare-earth deposits and Korea's processing capabilities—would require industrial agreements but could become a highly strategic initiative.

In the longer term, co-production of munitions and surge mechanisms for crisis-time stockpiles would demand extensive government-to-government coordination and industry alignment. Staff exchanges within NATO contexts may also be possible, though they would depend on South Korea deepening its political agreements with the Alliance. Finally, coordination on inter-theater munitions planning that links European and Asian allies would be politically logical but would require U.S. willingness to integrate middle powers like Sweden and South Korea into its planning.

Conclusion

Sweden is not a frontline East Asian power, but its experience in surviving under Russian pressure while integrating into NATO offers practical lessons for Japan and South Korea. By adapting Sweden's emphasis on household resilience, localized territorial defense, and coalition planning, U.S. allies in East Asia can better prepare for the nightmare scenario of simultaneous crises in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean Peninsula.

At the same time, deepening South Korea–Sweden cooperation—through immediate, medium-term, and longer-term initiatives—would enhance both regions' ability to deter and endure dual contingencies. In an era where Russia, China, and North Korea increasingly coordinate, democracies must respond in kind, and Stockholm's lessons—and Stockholm itself—should be part of East Asia's strategy.

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