



Sweden's Foreign and Security Policy in a Time of Flux



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Introduction

Sweden has a long tradition of international engagement. It has even been characterized as 'the most famously internationalist', emphasizing 'peace, freedom and welfare' on both the national and international levels (Lawler, 1997: 569). While the 1990s brought more intensive debate on Sweden's position, which resulted in EU membership (Gustavsson, 1998) and eventually a Europeanized foreign policy (Brommesson, 2010), an autonomous character with an independent voice later reappeared in Swedish foreign policy, sometimes coupled with the internationalist tradition (Hedling & Brommesson, 2017). Examples of this are unilateral decisions to establish a feminist foreign policy and to recognize Palestine as an independent state. When the structure of the international system allowed for it, Sweden was arguably a mid-sized defender of internationalism based on a strong multilateral order, because of its credibility as a liberal state staying true to international rules. Still, with a more hostile security environment, Sweden once again has to play the role of a small state (Brommesson 2018b). With the Russian attack on Ukraine, Swedish foreign and security policy has undergone a complete reversal with the decision to apply for membership of NATO breaking century-old doctrines, including the long tradition of non-alignment and policy of neutrality in times of war. Sweden is now applying for membership in NATO which might be achieved at the end of 2022. In this time of great instability and change, this policy brief turns to key Swedish priorities within

central themes of Swedish foreign and security policy.

Sweden and the Nordic region

The long trajectory of post-Cold War Nordic cooperation has provided Sweden, and the other Nordic countries, with a well-established starting point now that demands for deeper cooperation are intensifying (cf. Rieker, 2004). Once again, the close relationships between Sweden and its Nordic neighbours have proven to be crucial, not least in the case of Sweden and Finland. The growing importance of the Nordic dimension in Swedish foreign policy arguably reflects a renaissance of 'Nordicness' (Brommesson, 2018a, 2018b) and a need for closer security cooperation in a more uncertain situation. While the growing importance of Nordic cooperation has been visible in all five Nordic countries, it has been of particular relevance in what at least up until now have been the two traditionally non-aligned states, Sweden and Finland. From the perspective of these two countries the Nordic region is seen as forming a regional security environment, based on a shared security culture (ibid.).

In the more hostile security environment starting with the war in Georgia in 2008, the Nordic countries started to cooperate in procuring defence equipment as well as in more operative measures such as air patrolling over Iceland. These first steps of defence cooperation were taken within the multilateral Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) platform, established in 2009, but soon Sweden took additional bilateral steps, most often with Finland, but also with Norway and sometimes with Denmark.



Since 2014, Sweden and Finland have cooperated closely on operative defence matters. At the outset, the Swedish and Finnish defence ministers described the cooperation in terms of the preparation for a Swedish–Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG), a task force to reach full operative capacity by 2023, entailing the use of each other’s naval bases, joint anti-submarine exercises, increased air force interoperability, the use of each other’s air force bases, joint combat control, and development of a concept for deploying a joint army force the size of a brigade (Hultqvist & Haglund, 2015). Later, the Finnish–Swedish engagement was complemented by cooperation in civil defence in a trilateral setting, also including Norway (Swedish government, 2020a).

As the defence cooperation between Sweden and Finland intensified, it came close to border on a defence alliance. While Finnish decision makers did not seem to reject the idea, their Swedish counterparts did not express the same openness to formalizing the cooperation in terms of a treaty or alliance. Still, Sweden has recently described Swedish defence policy, and Finland’s role in it, as ‘a defence policy that rests on two pillars: strengthened national capability and deepened international defence cooperation. Our cooperation with Finland has a special status in this’ (Swedish government, 2022a).

No matter what concepts are used to describe the Finnish-Swedish relationship, it has extended beyond any other form of defence cooperation, barring a formal alliance. Up to 2022, it had been seen as a way to strengthen the defence capacity of

Sweden and Finland without causing any unnecessary or destabilizing tension in the neighbourhood. However, with the Russian attack on Ukraine in late February 2022, the north European security order has fallen apart and there seems little possibility of preserving it. The need for a third option between non-alignment and NATO membership was therefore no longer seen as a viable alternative. With the applications of Finland and Sweden to become members of NATO, it is interesting to note discussions of continuing Finnish–Swedish cooperation, and possibly of wider Nordic cooperation, as NATO members.

Although much focus of Finno-Swedish cooperation has been on defence and security, Sweden maintains close cooperation with its Nordic partners in other fields. A well-established component is the coordination of policies within the UN machinery, including the coordination of candidacies for the UN Security Council (Ekengren & Möller 2021).

Another component is coordination on Arctic issues. In the latest Arctic policy document from 2020, the Swedish government states that ‘Sweden is an Arctic country’ and that the Swedish government ‘intends to work to strengthen Nordic cooperation on issues concerning the Arctic where the interests of the Nordic countries coincide’. Although the Swedish government recognizes that the Nordic countries have different starting points for their Arctic policies, the obvious difference being Denmark’s (Greenland) and Norway’s (Svalbard) geographical presence in the Arctic Ocean, a common Nordic policy regarding the Arctic is still possible because



the Nordic countries 'share a community of values' (Swedish government, 2020b).

While we have seen a renaissance of the Nordic dimension in general, it is important to note the variance in the importance of this dimension between the Nordic countries. While it is fair to say that the Nordic dimension plays a second or third role in Norway and Denmark (Graeger, 2018; Wivel, 2018), it appears as though Sweden and Finland remain in the core of Nordic cooperation, intending to strengthen this Nordic community of values.

Swedish non-alignment

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 suddenly shifted public and media attention towards Sweden's security policy. Since the war broke out on 24 February 2022, Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson, Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist, and Foreign Minister Ann Linde have travelled extensively to participate in meetings with the EU and NATO, and in bilateral meetings with the USA, Great Britain, and other NATO members. The questions discussed concerned the war, and how Sweden and other states could assist Ukraine without extending the war to the whole of Europe. But the questions discussed have also concerned Sweden's relationship to NATO, and the existing multiple bilateral security agreements with other states, such as Finland, Norway, Denmark, the USA, and Great Britain – the so-called Hultqvist doctrine (Wieslander, 2022).

In Sweden, the Russian war on Ukraine led to a conclusion on the political level that Sweden needed an updated security strategy. When Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ann Linde gave the Statement of Government Policy in the Parliamentary Debate on Foreign Affairs on 16 February 2022, eight days before the Russian invasion, Russia was described as a threat to the European security order, meaning a threat to states' sovereignty and right to choose their own security path. However, at the time, it was thought that the situation was not grave enough for Sweden to re-evaluate its decision to remain non-aligned. Linde explicitly said that 'the Government does not intend to apply for NATO membership' (Swedish government 2022a). The policy of non-alignment was described as contributing to stability and serving Swedish interests. According to Linde, Sweden's non-alignment rested on two pillars: stronger national defence and deeper international defence cooperation. Once the war in Ukraine had broken out, the security situation was perceived by government representatives as having changed fundamentally. From this followed intensified debate on Swedish security policy. Was non-alignment still the best choice for Sweden, or should Sweden apply for membership in NATO? In media appearances, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson did not rule out the possibility of NATO membership. This indicated a new openness towards NATO membership among Swedish Social Democrats: earlier, they held that non-alignment was not in need of revision and the door to NATO membership seemed firmly closed. These first steps were followed by a rapid re-orientation and on May 15 the Swedish



Social Democrats decided to adopt a new policy in favour of NATO membership. The day after, May 16, the Swedish government decided to apply for membership (Socialdemokraterna 2022).

Historically, Sweden has a long history of being non-aligned and pursuing a policy of neutrality. This policy of neutrality has been described as successful and fulfilling a strategic purpose, especially during the two world wars (Huldt, 2002). It is worth remembering that while Sweden's policy of neutrality failed in terms of consistency during these wars, Sweden's flexible interpretation of neutrality contributed to its success (Brommesson et al., 2022). During the Cold War, Sweden reiterated its claim to be non-aligned, having the intention to stay neutral in the case of conflict. The explicit emphasis on this intention to stay neutral was intended to project perceived trustworthiness, as the decision had been made beforehand. Although Sweden clearly leaned towards the West in terms of a shared political culture and shared values such as democracy and human rights, Sweden was eager to maintain good relations with both sides in the Cold War and to treat both sides equally. The Social Democrats, continuously in government from 1932 to 1976, were sometimes criticized for not being more critical of the Soviet Union. Sweden's active foreign policy – being a generous foreign aid donor, supporting the Third World in the UN, and criticizing human rights abuses and assaults on states' sovereignty – was partly a way for Sweden to support certain values and increase its manoeuvring room, and partly a way to give Sweden's foreign policy a moral orientation.

In the early 1990s, after the Cold War ended, we saw the first signs of change in the neutrality doctrine. Until then, Sweden's security policy had been phrased consistently: Sweden is non-aligned, with the *intention* to be neutral in times of war. The new wording said that Sweden was militarily non-aligned with the *possibility* of being neutral in the event of a war in Sweden's neighbourhood. The two wordings can be seen as very similar but hiding fundamentally different views. According to the first statement, the decision to remain neutral is the obvious one and entails limited room for flexibility, as it was important to be credible. In the second statement, the possibility of choosing how to act was more emphasized: Sweden should be able to choose neutrality but could also choose otherwise if that would better serve Swedish interests. The Swedish policy of neutrality went from emphasizing predictability to emphasizing increased manoeuvring room.

In the early 2000s, the Swedish policy of neutrality was reformulated again. The Swedish government now emphasized that non-alignment had strong public support, contributed to stability in northern Europe, and permitted Sweden to formulate an independent foreign policy (Britz, 2016). That EU membership had affected Sweden's possibility of staying neutral in the case of conflict involving European neighbours had reinforced the need to rephrase statements on Sweden's non-alignment and policy of neutrality. Sweden was still non-aligned, but Sweden's EU membership and several security agreements with other states ensured that Sweden would be unable or unwilling to



maintain neutrality in the case of conflict in its neighbourhood. This has been reiterated in many Swedish government statements, and in the Statement of Government Policy from 16 February 2022, Foreign Minister Linde said that 'Sweden will not remain passive if another EU Member State or Nordic country suffers a disaster or an attack. We expect these countries to act in the same way if Sweden is affected'. The statements were intended to send a clear signal as to what Sweden expects in a certain situation, but do not carry the same weight as statements invoking formal military alliance.

Sweden's cooperation with NATO, particularly in security matters, has been strengthened over time. Sweden has seen NATO's Partnership for Peace as a way of contributing to a European security structure (Bjereld & Möller, 2010). Sweden has wanted to be seen as a primary partner of NATO, but up until May 2022 without becoming a member (Pettersson, 2017). The so-called Hultqvist doctrine, developed since 2014, meant that Sweden would increase its military spending while seeking broader and deeper defence cooperation with other states (Kunz, 2015; Wieslander, 2022). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Finland started to signal a fundamental reorientation of its security policy, it became clear to leading politicians of the Social Democratic party, the conservative party (Moderaterna), the Liberal party, the Christian Democratic party, the Centre Party and the Swedish Democrats, that earlier bilateral defence agreements would not be enough. Shortly before the shift, a parliamentary committee had drafted a report on the consequences of the Russian

aggression for Swedish security policy and concluded that:

Swedish NATO membership would raise the threshold for military conflicts and thus have a deterrent effect in northern Europe. If both Sweden and Finland were NATO members, all Nordic and Baltic countries would be covered by collective defence guarantees. The current uncertainty as to what form collective action would take if a security crisis or armed attack occurred would decrease (Swedish government 2022b).

This advice was heeded by the social democrats who concluded after an internal consultation among the party members to work in favour of membership in NATO and on May 16, the Social democratic government decided that Sweden would apply for NATO membership.

Sweden's foreign and security policy and the EU

Historically, Sweden was sceptical towards the efforts of continental European countries to set up an economic organization with clear ambitions for deeper political integration at the end of the Second World War (af Malmberg, 1994). Although the European Community (EC) had no foreign and security ambitions immediately after the War, the EC's association with the Western sphere during the Cold War was enough for Sweden to conclude that membership was incompatible with its traditional neutral stance. For some in the Swedish political establishment, banding together with former colonial powers was felt to run counter to Sweden's active international stance on global issues and especially



relations with the global South. Therefore, not until the end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union, did Swedish opposition to EU membership on the grounds of neutrality weaken. In this context, prospects of the future accession of countries in central and eastern Europe also played an important role, as it was believed that an enlarged EU would dampen the prospects for deeper political integration.

Since the accession to the EU in 1995, Sweden has adopted a quite pragmatic attitude to the coordination of various aspects of foreign policy, and has taken a constructive stance in some areas, actively working towards a more visible presence in the EU abroad. Early on, Sweden actively contributed to a more coordinated European development policy, including improving the governance and transparency of the EU's foreign aid delivery and promoting development objectives such as poverty relief and the rights of women and children. Also, Sweden supported the EU's increasingly strong global voice in international climate negotiations, which led the Swedish Green Party to abandon its goal of removing Sweden from the EU. The EU's emphasis on human security, including endowing itself with peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and reconstruction capabilities, was much in line with the reorientation of the Swedish armed forces and their international outlook in the early 2000s (Michalski, 2020). More recently, Sweden has been a constructive partner in strengthening the EU's crisis-management capacity and in taking steps to make European societies more resilient in adverse circumstances, including natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and even armed conflict –

a concept in line with the traditional Swedish total defence doctrine (Engberg, 2022).

Although Swedish governments under different political leaderships have been willing to participate constructively in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the engagement has been based on an understanding that interaction should remain intergovernmental. This position was maintained even after the introduction of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, which made important improvements to the functioning of the CFSP and boosted the EU's external presence through strengthening the office of the High Representative. In this vein, steps towards deeper integration favoured by some Member States, for example, by endowing the EU with independent military capacities, have been received with scepticism by Sweden, while efforts to boost the EU's strategic autonomy have been greeted with wariness. Nonetheless, Sweden decided to take part in the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2017 although the Social Democratic government has not actively sought to be included in more than a handful of projects and has insisted on the participation of third countries in PESCO projects (Engberg, 2021; Hultqvist, 2019). This caution may be due to several reasons, such as deep-seated strategic ambivalence, complex ownership structures in the Swedish defence industry, the deep scepticism of the government's (former) coalition party, the Green Party, and the outright hostility to an EU defence dimension by its current supporting party, the Left Party.



More recently, the EU's internal cohesion and ability to take action in the realm of foreign and security policy have been put to the test. Faced with an increasingly autocratic and self-assured China, the Swedish government has supported the EU's strategy of levelling the economic playing field through the now suspended Comprehensive Investment Agreement and of seeking engagement in addressing climate change, green conversion, and carbon neutrality. At the same time, Sweden has stood up for European interests against China, be it in the form of the Foreign Investment Screening Mechanism or the anti-coercion instrument under negotiation. Sweden also supported the establishment of the EU's Global Human Rights Regime in December 2020, and in March 2021 sanctions were levied against Chinese individuals for breaches of human rights in Xinjiang. In the war in Ukraine, Sweden has aligned with EU institutions and other Member States in forging a common response in condemning the Russian invasion and adopting a widening scope of sanctions. Clearly, in this conflict, Sweden appreciates the importance of showing, with its European partners, a united front against Russia. The war has also shifted Sweden's understanding of the EU as a security actor, by prompting recognition of its role in the new European security architecture and in combating non-military forms of hostility. The EU's solidarity clause in the event of an armed attack enshrined in Article 42(7) was even mentioned as an alternative to membership in NATO. However, the parliamentary report on the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for Swedish security reached the conclusion that there was a lack

of political will within EU for such an alternative (Swedish government 2022b).

Overall, in a world characterized by growing geopolitical tensions, chiefly arising from the actions of the revisionist powers, China and Russia, Sweden has been aligned with the EU's positions and policies. It also supports the EU's institutions' attempts to find a balance between upholding the rules-based international order and the associated liberal norms and principles, and protecting and securing its economic, strategic, and political interests.

Conclusions

With the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sweden has re-evaluated several cornerstones of its foreign and security policy. Two obvious examples discussed here are the intense debate on Sweden's non-alignment policy, resulting in the decision to apply for membership in NATO, and a stronger emphasis on and support for cooperation with the EU on defence and security issues. At the same time, we see how the increasing levels of Nordic cooperation since 2008 continue to be a central theme of Swedish statements, although increasingly based on bilateral or trilateral agreements.

Upon the announcement to seek membership of NATO of the Finnish and Swedish governments, the contours of the security architecture of northern Europe, including the Arctic and the Baltic Seas, has become clearer. At the same time, uncertainty remains as to the conditions and speed of integration into NATO and the specificity regarding how the modalities of



cooperation in the transatlantic, EU, and Nordic arenas will evolve, and whether deeper engagement in all three can be unified into a single coherent Swedish foreign policy doctrine. For long, Swedish foreign and security policy was characterized by openness to various forms of security cooperation, except for membership in NATO. This provided

Sweden with great flexibility but arguably made it appear less predictable in the eyes of the surrounding world. In times of high levels of tension in the Swedish neighbourhood, predictability and certainty are now being prioritized over flexibility, as witnessed by the decision to apply for membership in NATO.



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