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COMMENT

Charly Salenius-Pasternak
Senior Research Fellow
The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

The Swedish defence policy paradox > Sweden wants to stay militarily non-allied while seeking ever closer defence cooperation with others

Changes in the security landscape of the Baltic region have had a notable effect on Sweden's security policy. While the Swedish government still emphasizes continuity and stability, developments in the country's security environment may lead to significant changes in its foreign and security policy.

For two decades after the end of the Cold War, Sweden's security policy was based on the notion of permanent peace in the country's neighbourhood. Sweden's defence forces were reorganized for the conduct of international and crisis management operations.

In recent years, however, the Swedish government has reassessed the potential threats facing Sweden. The country's new official line is built, paradoxically, on being both militarily non-allied and on a declaration of military solidarity towards EU members and other Nordic states. In order for it to work, this policy requires both a credible national defence capability (which Sweden does not yet have) and more international cooperation (which it is currently working on).

The emerging 'Hultqvist doctrine', named after Minister of Defence Peter Hultqvist, has been seen as an attempt to solve the discrepancies in this policy. Sweden is reinforcing its own defence capability, and building the capacity for operational wartime cooperation with Finland and the United States.

At the same time, Sweden is continuing to build a closer relationship with NATO while retaining its status as a country that does not belong to a military alliance.

In building its defence, Sweden now emphasizes the role of Finland and the US. Figuratively speaking, one might say that Sweden is drawing its shield closer while reaching out across the Atlantic for a bigger sword.

Cooperation with Denmark and Poland has also increased, as part of Sweden's recent activity in creating closer military relations with other Baltic Sea littoral nations. The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the European Union is, however, not a priority as its contribution to operative capacity-building is limited.

Sweden's security and defence policy is often described as stable, but the choices successive governments have made in recent decades do not support this claim. Some in Sweden are already preparing for the possibility that the 'transitional' policy based on the aforementioned paradox is nearing the end of its usefulness. Should there be changes in the government, Sweden may make swift changes to its security policy.

One option could be to significantly strengthen national defence capabilities, combined with deep bilateral cooperation with Finland and the US. At the same time, the solidarity declaration would receive

less focus and the current extensive cooperation with NATO would be reduced. However, due to economic, historical as well as practical reasons, this is an unlikely direction.

A second alternative would be for Sweden to apply for membership of NATO. This would be the biggest change in the country's defence and security policy since joining the EU two decades ago. For several reasons, the probability of Sweden applying to NATO in the coming years has grown.

Sweden's domestic situation has changed significantly enough during the past three years for a shift in security policy to take place. The winds of change have been blowing at least since the spring of 2013, when Russia practised a nuclear strike against key military targets in Sweden.

Events such as this 'Russian Easter' have had an effect on the Swedish decision-makers as well as the population at large. All opinion polls show that opposition to NATO membership has decreased. The change is undeniable, as the polls have never before shown Swedes to have as much support for NATO as they do now. This is indicative of an increasing understanding that Sweden is dependent on outside assistance in its national defence.

Finnish Institute of
International Affairs

Kruunuvuorenkatu 4

POB 400

00161 Helsinki

Telephone

+358 (0)9 432 7000

Fax

+358 (0)9 432 7799

www.fiia.fi

The most significant change is taking place amongst the politicians. All of the parties in the centre-right Alliance are now openly supportive of NATO membership, and the party leaders aim to make this one of the defining issues in the next parliamentary elections. Less attention has been paid to the fact that amongst the supporters of the governing Social Democratic party, only a small majority now oppose NATO membership. Some have even noted a new kind of tone in the public statements of Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist.

There has been speculation that NATO might not have accepted new members in the immediate aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. However, the situation has already changed during the past year, for one simple reason: the political and military leadership of NATO has woken up to the challenges of defending its Baltic members, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

Simulations and exercises have made it clear that NATO needs Sweden's ground and airspace in a crisis or conflict concerning the Baltic states. Correspondingly, Sweden needs support from NATO members for its own defence. As a result of this, many now consider that NATO would accept Sweden as a member should it apply.

Those Swedes in favour of joining NATO are concerned by one question: would Finland be ready to make a joint decision with Sweden about applying for NATO membership? Observers in Stockholm are concluding that Finnish debates about defence policy now seem more constrained than a few years ago.

The conclusion drawn in Sweden seems to be that Finland will not be ready to make a joint NATO decision in the next few years, maybe not even during this decade. This comes as a relief to the current Swedish red-green government and to others who hope that Finland's reluctance would also prevent Sweden from applying for NATO membership.

In the event that domestic changes or outside events increase the pressure on Sweden to change its course, the Swedish leaders will have two options regarding Finland. One is to try to harmonize the goals of the two countries through an active defence policy discussion. The other is to decouple the two countries' decisions. In the latter case, Sweden would simply state that it is in its own national security interests to apply for NATO membership, regardless of what Finland chooses to do.

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