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# TRAPPED IN THE TWILIGHT ZONE?

SWEDEN BETWEEN NEUTRALITY AND NATO



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the end of the Cold War, Sweden has gradually left the cocoon of neutrality in favour of integration into the formal structures of the West. But Sweden still hesitates to take the step of joining NATO, despite having a considerable security deficit now that Russia is once again considered a threat. This hesitancy is largely due to the powerful pull of a past long separated from the European mainstream, a past where neutrality was seen as morally superior and a part of national identity. This emotional pull makes reappraisal and revision both painful and potentially politically costly.

Like most European states, Sweden really believed that Eternal Liberal Peace had broken out in the 1990s, and radically cut its armed forces as a result. Now that Russia is once again a manifest threat to the region and has discarded the European Security Order, there is a strong and urgent sense of vulnerability. Moreover, most of the traditional arguments in favour of non-alignment have become irrelevant. Public and political opinion has shifted towards membership of NATO as soon as possible, but a sizeable segment of the population and the political class still regards the Alliance as anathema.

The current centre-left government is trying to square the circle by pursuing very close defence ties bilaterally with the US and Finland, as well as with NATO, while remaining formally unaligned. This has succeeded to an amazing degree to date, but the question remains as to whether this approach is tenable in the long run.

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Not long ago, most Nordic analysts and scholars who took an interest in the issue of whether Sweden should join NATO, or remain “neutral” in some shape or form, gave the matter dignified consideration as an issue of security policy, or of national strategy. While some such accounts are still produced, the matter is increasingly seen as one of politics rather than policy. Sweden’s ongoing integration into Western structures, the re-emergence of a Russian threat to Europe, and Sweden’s current military weakness have lent greater weight to the arguments in favour of joining the Alliance.

With time, these events, the ongoing debate, and shifts in public opinion have also undermined many of the traditional – and once very dominant – arguments against joining NATO and in favour of continued non-alignment. One by one, the serious and strategic arguments in support of the present policy have fallen by the wayside, until only two, possibly three, remain.<sup>2</sup> These are, first, not putting pressure on Finland, and second, that non-alignment gives Sweden *handlingsfrihet* (freedom of action), which is politico-diplomatic code for being able to pick and choose. A third serious argument is possible, and analogous to the one made in the Finnish NATO study (see below), namely that the transition from military non-alignment to NATO membership might be vulnerable to Russian interference. However, this argument has not been made publicly in Sweden, maybe because it would clash with the existing arguments of both the pro-NATO and anti-NATO camps. In any event, deterioration of the official position on non-alignment has now progressed to the point where the current government has had to resort to procedural arguments such as “no sharp turns” and “the issue is not on the agenda”. Thus, it is increasingly obvious that the crux lies not in security policy, but in politics.

The relegation of an issue from policy to politics does not necessarily make the issue easier to solve, however. As Stalin famously observed, the class struggle hardens as it progresses. Within the political parties, the strongest support for staying outside NATO is found in the ex-communist Left Party, in the Greens and in the left wing of the Social Democrats. The Social Democrats are not as dominant as they used to be, but still form the largest party. However, at their current 25–30% of the electorate, the Social Democrats could not afford any further large-scale loss of voters.

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1 The writer is personally responsible for the content of this text, which does not necessarily represent the views of the FOI or of the Swedish government. The text has been adapted and expanded from presentations given to delegations from the US and the UK during 2015 and 2016. The author wishes to thank François Heisbourg, Beatrice Heuser, Leo Michel and Andrew Michta for commenting on earlier drafts.

2 From 1960 to 1990, the policy of neutrality was so sacrosanct in the domestic context that it didn’t really need supporting arguments – axioms seldom do. However, for foreign audiences, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had to provide serious arguments. Possibly the best such modern text is Krister Wahlbäck’s *The roots of Swedish neutrality* (Stockholm: SI, 1986). 10–15 years later, the choice between non-alignment or NATO was the subject of a lively debate. An overview and analysis of the arguments and attitudes at that time is provided in Robert Dalsjö, *Argument och attityder i alliansfrågan*, Kungl. Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar och Tidskrift 1999:4, downloadable at <http://www.kkrva.se/wp-content/uploads/Artiklar/994/alliansfragan.html>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

Despite the fact that political scientists regard security policy as a minor issue in the eyes of voters, many leading Social Democrats still see a decision to part with 200 years of non-alignment and also with the heritage of Olof Palme as a decision that could split the party, or lead to widespread defections to the Left Party or to the Greens. At the very least, one could expect any serious intra-party debate on the matter to be tumultuous, emotionally charged and divisive, and this in a party that is still licking its wounds after the decision to join the EU in the early 1990s. Moreover, while all four parties in the non-socialist alliance that held power between 2006 and 2014 have since come to support NATO membership as soon as possible, all but the Liberals are recent converts to the cause, and their rank and file are divided on the matter. In fact, scratch the surface of almost any Swede and you will find instincts and a sense of detachment from the European mainstream that are the results of 200 years on the side-lines of history.

Politics is not always logical or rational in a Cartesian or Realist sense, nor the result of a simple clash of class interests in a Marxist sense. One reason for this is that among the determinants of a state's policies are emotions and issues related to identity and self-image. When such aspects are involved, they can supercharge the political discourse with emotional intensity. Just like gun control or abortion in the US, contentious issues of security policy in Sweden involve deeply held convictions and senses of identity which make change, settlement and compromise much more difficult.

This Working Paper addresses the facts, factors, choices, stances and underlying mental attitudes that shape Sweden's self-image concerning matters of hard security, including that of NATO membership. Taken together, these factors and attitudes constitute what I call the political terrain and the topography of mentalities, a terrain or topography which is in large part shaped by events in the past, or by interpretations of such events.<sup>3</sup> For very different reasons, based on very different histories and mentalities, Sweden and Finland have hitherto both come to the same conclusion – that alliances are to be avoided and that there is no need to join NATO. Here, the perceived lessons of the past and the image of self-reliance still exert a powerful pull. However, 25 years of integration with the West have created a new pull, which has recently been reinforced by Russia's threatening behaviour, indicating that small countries are not safe on their own. This pull from two opposite directions has led some in Sweden to search for a middle way between NATO membership and neutrality. But this begs the question of whether such a state of affairs can exist, or whether Sweden risks being trapped in a twilight zone between two clear alternatives.

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3 From their earliest training, military officers are taught to "read" and analyze the physical terrain for tactical purposes, and subsequently for operational purposes as well. Given time and talent, it becomes second nature to some officers. I posit that there is also another kind of terrain, which is increasingly relevant to military officers as the nature of operations changes: the political terrain. Just like the physical terrain, the political terrain can be amenable to attack or to defence, be passable or impassable, provide cover or not, and so forth. And just as the features of the physical terrain are affected by the physical weather – frost can suddenly turn an impassable marsh or river into a marching route – the defining features of the political terrain can be transformed by the political weather, making it possible to pass obstacles previously thought insurmountable. Despite its importance and prominence in decisions big and small, few (Swedish) military officers are aware of the existence of the political terrain, and even fewer can read and analyze it. Reading the political terrain and the political weather is not a dark art. It just requires time, training and talent.

## NEUTRAL NO MORE?

If this paper had been written a couple of years ago, it could have started with a few sentences making fun of those – Swedes and foreigners alike – who speak of Sweden as being “neutral” in the present tense. To some degree, it would have been right to ridicule members of the chattering classes who appear as talking heads in the media, despite not having noticed that things have changed since the 1970s. In the run-up to a vote in the Swedish parliament in 2016 concerning a host-nation agreement with NATO, opponents claimed that neutral Sweden was covertly, without public debate and with malice aforethought, being led into NATO’s lair. This claim is patently wrong, as anyone that has been following events and the news for the last 25 years with anything like an open mind can testify.<sup>4</sup>

However, less than two years ago, the late Alyson Bailes – British diplomat and scholar – referred to Sweden as being “neutral”, that made me rethink the matter. I realized that – in a way – Sweden was still neutral, as were the Swedes.<sup>5</sup> Not neutral in the sense of international law or of official dogma during the Cold War, but in mentality and by not being fully committed. When it comes to hard security, Sweden remains on the side-lines of the West, with at least one foot outside and one eye always on the door, carefully weighing whether its interests would be best served by staying or going. Even as our government talks about how our security is inextricably linked to that of others, it carefully adds an opt-out clause to any would-be commitment. And as mentioned, *handlingsfrihet* is indeed one of the few strategic arguments remaining in support of the current policy. It means that Sweden hopes to be able to apply a smorgasbord approach to international security and conflict – carefully selecting the morsels it likes, while avoiding the dishes that taste bad or that could cause heartburn, or worse.

So, in a way, Sweden is both neutral and non-neutral at the same time. Most Swedes have long since relinquished the dogmatic and ideologically tinted neutrality of the Cold War – which in reality was far less than pristine. However, the body politic has not really found a new stable position to occupy. Also, for 15 years, Swedish political masters and much of the population really believed that Eternal Liberal Peace had broken out, and that there was no need for territorial defence in Sweden or for robust security arrangements. All that was needed was a small force for international do-goodery. With time, globalisation would turn everybody into law-abiding, middle-class liberals in a neat and tidy world.

Only that did not happen. Instead, Putin invaded Georgia. And when that didn’t wake the Swedes up, he invaded Ukraine too. Then ISIS struck against Paris and Brussels, and Europe was inundated with migrants from the Middle East. The EU, already under

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4 Johan Raeder, the then policy director of the Swedish MoD, delivered a very effective rebuttal of such claims at a public meeting in Stockholm on May 10, 2012, citing chapter and verse of official statements and parliamentary decisions on Sweden’s cooperation with NATO, but his text was apparently never published.

5 In her comments at the launch of Carolina Sandö, John Rydqvist and Richard Langlais (ed.), *Strategic Outlook 6*, FOI-R–4124–SE, (Stockholm: FOI, 2015), Alyson Bailes’ reference to Sweden as neutral started a train of thought, as she could hardly be ignorant of the fact that Sweden had officially dropped the neutrality label in 1992, and was not given to sloppy statements, what could she have meant? The only reasonable answer that came to mind was “neutral” in the sense of being uncommitted.

pressure due to the euro crisis, was not up to dealing with this and is clearly bursting at the seams. To top it all off, China is flexing its new military muscles in the South China Sea.

A lot of Swedes have woken up to the idea that the world is dangerous again, that Russia is a menace, that the EU is on the ropes, and that Sweden has neither national armed forces worthy of the name, nor any credible security guarantees. Sweden is stuck in the middle, or in a no man's land, between neutrality and NATO. In the words of two respected diplomats separately tasked with studying the issue, the current policy leaves Sweden in a "twilight zone" where Moscow sees the country as part of the enemy's camp, but Sweden has neither security guarantees nor any say about contingency planning and arrangements for assistance.<sup>6</sup>

In part, this state of affairs may reflect the fact that the Swedish policy and political attitudes are still in the process of slow change; change because the surrounding world is changing, but only slowly because of the powerful pull of attitudes shaped by the past. The root cause here is a sense of separation from the European mainstream. Sweden is not an island nation like the UK (albeit, strictly speaking, the UK is not one nation, but at least three), but it is separated from the historical experience of most peoples on the continent in that Sweden has not been at war in over 200 years. Sweden took early retirement from world history after the Napoleonic wars, and traded the pursuit of glory for the pursuit of happiness and prosperity. That long period of increasingly affluent peace tends to make many Swedes somewhat smug and aloof, thinking that they have found a secret formula that others have not. Thus, in the national narrative *Felix Suecia* has no need for alliances or help from others, because nothing really nasty happens to countries that pursue such wise and enlightened policies.

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6 Tomas Bertelman, *Försvarspolitiskt samarbete – effektivitet, solidaritet, suveränitet*. Rapport från Utredningen om Sveriges internationella försvarspolitiska samarbete Fö 2013:B (Stockholm: Fö, 2014); Krister Bringéus, *Säkerhet i ny tid – Betänkande av Utredningen om Sveriges försvars- och säkerhetspolitiska samarbeten* SOU 2016: (Stockholm: UD, 2016).

## THE DEEP ROOTS OF NEUTRALITY

Originally, and for one and a half centuries, the reason for Sweden's neutrality was mainly a small state's version of Realism. Sweden had its fingers badly burnt playing the power game and finally realised that it was better for small fry to stay out of the fray. The result was a new grand strategy, the so-called Policy of 1812, whereby Sweden reconciled itself to the loss of Finland and the Baltic provinces, tended its own cabbage patch, accepted the fact that Russia was the strongest power in the region, and avoided conflict with it. However, quietly counting on the countervailing influence of the great western sea power, should Russian pressure become overwhelming, was also part of the grand strategy.

The final point – about relying on other powers to balance and contain Russia – is part of a more cynical and sophisticated version of the *Felix Suecia* mindset, which Tomas Bertelman dubbed *oumbärlighetens tillförsikt*.<sup>7</sup> This roughly translates as being convinced that one is indispensable. According to this view, if Sweden needed help from others, such help would somehow be forthcoming regardless of Sweden's formal status. Those who think that Sweden can, in effect, act as a free-rider argue that this approach has worked for 200 years. Even during the Cold War, as we now know, the US was prepared to help Sweden militarily if attacked by Russia, despite Sweden's official "neutrality" and its occasional vociferous criticism of US policies.<sup>8</sup> During the latter part of the Cold War, this fact was a hidden premise of Swedish security policy and defence planning, but it was steeped in extremely strong taboos and it was dangerous to even allude to it.<sup>9</sup> For ten years now, it has been openly stated as part of the declaratory doctrine that Sweden expects help from others in the event that it is attacked.<sup>10</sup>

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7 Bertelman, *Försvarspolitiskt*, 68ff. It is ironic that the inhabitants of Finland have reached the same conclusion, but based on an entirely different and less idyllic interpretation of history. In their national narrative, Finland lives in a harsh world where you have to fight for survival and can only rely on your own abilities. Helping others is wasteful and alliances are at best useless, because no one will ever help Finland to fight Russia anyhow. The fact that this view is not entirely historically correct, given that Swedish help was crucial in the Winter War and German help was decisive in the summer of 1944, does not really matter to many in Finland. Cf. a recent survey of Finnish officers' views. [https://www.upseeriliitto.fi/uutiset/julkiset\\_tiedotteet/upseeriliiton\\_jasentutkimus\\_2017.5573.news](https://www.upseeriliitto.fi/uutiset/julkiset_tiedotteet/upseeriliiton_jasentutkimus_2017.5573.news). Last accessed 25 April 2017.

8 *Had there been a war ... Preparations for the reception of military assistance 1949–1969*. Report of the Commission on Neutrality Policy. (Translation of SOU 1994:11) (Stockholm: Fritzes, 1994). 103 ff. The conclusion is based on NSC 6006/1, which is reprinted in facsimile as an appendix to *Had there been...*

9 Robert Dalsjö, *Life-Line Lost: The Rise and Fall of 'Neutral' Sweden's Secret Reserve Option of Wartime Help from the West* (Stockholm: Santérus Academic Publishing, 2006).

10 For example, "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. Our country must therefore be in a position to both give and receive support, civilian as well as military". Statement of Government Policy in the Parliamentary Debate on Foreign Affairs, Wednesday 11 February 2015. Downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/49b754/contentassets/98c376175ed047e4b851715fb0a8541a/statement-of-government-policy-in-the-parliamentary-debate-on-foreign-affairs-2015>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

The policy of neutrality also served other purposes, such as channelling national energies into the development of industry, subsequently containing domestic tension between pro-German and pro-British camps, and after 1945 maintaining the political hegemony of the Social Democratic party, and neutering domestic opponents.<sup>11</sup>

However, the public face of the Swedish neutrality policy, both in Sweden and abroad, has largely been shaped by an entirely different strand of neutrality. In the late 1960s, Olof Palme introduced morally-based activism in Swedish foreign policy, starting with condemnation of US warfare in Vietnam. The neutrality policy was thus imbued with a sense of moral goodness and superiority that it did not possess before, duly erasing some of the nastier stains of Sweden's wartime neutrality in the process. To be Swedish was to be Neutral, to be Neutral was to be Good, thus it was Good to be a Swede. The feel-good effect was very appealing to both public and politicians alike. Neutrality soon became something of a national meta-ideology, blending with modernity, economic growth and the welfare state to form a new national identity. Swedes thought – and were taught – that they had found a superior and more enlightened model for their nation, which others ought to emulate. Hence, it was not Sweden that ought to adapt to the outside world, but the outside world that ought to adopt the wise ways of Sweden. Feelings of aloofness and self-sufficiency were not far behind.

This more ideological and value-laden strain in Sweden's international position has proved to be highly resistant to change. Such major changes and setbacks as 20 years of economic stagnation, the fall of the Berlin Wall, 500% interest rates, and EU membership have made noticeable dents in it, but ideological attachment to the old paradigm of self-sufficient neutrality remains a powerful factor in the body politic and is one of the main reasons why Sweden was deeply divided on EU membership and has not yet joined NATO. This should not really be surprising. While a policy based on expediency and realism ought to change when circumstances change, a policy anchored in identity and ideology does not change so easily.

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11 Cf. Dalsjö, *Life-Line Lost*, Ch. 2.1.

## AFTER THE COLD WAR

The fall of the Berlin Wall took most Swedish government officials by surprise, and they reacted with bewilderment rather than with elation. This applied not only to the political side, but also to the military. Many refused to accept that the end of the world as they knew it had come, and that the neutrality policy had become both obsolete and irrelevant.

The onset of a major domestic economic crisis focussed attention elsewhere, and in an aside in an emergency economic bill to parliament in October 1990, the Social Democratic government declared its intention to join the European Communities, a step hitherto categorically ruled out because of the necessity to maintain the credibility of the policy of neutrality.<sup>12</sup>

The prospect of Sweden joining what was becoming the European Union necessitated a reformulation of the security policy. In 1992, the new non-socialist government led by Carl Bildt convinced the major parties to agree to a new formula. This replaced the policy of neutrality with *military non-alignment*, which gave Sweden the *option* of neutrality in the event of war *in its vicinity*. The latter part of the formula represented the remnants of the Policy of 1812, with its emphasis on avoiding a conflict with Russia.

During the 1990s, Sweden was slowly pulled into the orbits of the EU and NATO. In 1993, Sweden sent a mechanised battalion to Bosnia, in part to prove its credentials as a prospective member of the EU. As the Swedish army's Centurion tanks were too old, Denmark was asked to provide its slightly less obsolete Leopard 1s.<sup>13</sup> In 1994, Sweden joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), and in 1995 became a full member of the EU. The same year, Sweden placed its troops in Bosnia under NATO's command. NATO's role in ending the gruesome war in Bosnia, which the UN had failed to do, helped legitimise military cooperation with the Alliance.

Despite these changes, large parts of the Swedish establishment and public opinion remained enamoured with the old policy and the paradigm of neutrality, and resisted moves for closer cooperation on security within the EU and with NATO.

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12 Regeringens skrivelse 1990/91:50 om åtgärder för att stabilisera ekonomin och begränsa tillväxten av de offentliga utgifterna, 26 oktober 1990.

13 An indication of the Army's lack of modern gear was the looting of storage facilities for three mobilisation brigades in order to provide radio sets for the single battalion in Bosnia, and the fact that all of the night-vision devices and heavy machine guns of the battalion in Bosnia came from the recently organised amphibious battalions of the Coast Artillery, as the Army had no such gear.

## THE SEEDS OF INTERNATIONALISATION

During the 1990s, five factors were at work slowly pushing Swedish security and defence policies in a more international direction. The first was Sweden's EU membership, which was prompted by a manifest collapse of the national economic model and facilitated by the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Swedes were initially very reluctant Europeans, but gradually came to terms with the fact that they were members of a Union, and that this had its advantages.

The second factor was the re-establishment of the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This was a great boon to Sweden's national interests and national security, and the Swedish government played a key role in helping to secure the withdrawal of Russian troops, working in close concert with the US.<sup>14</sup> After the withdrawal of Russian troops, Sweden expanded an existing programme of "sovereignty support" to include military assistance with surplus equipment and with training.

In parallel, there was an international debate on the future security status of the Baltic states. Some argued that these states could not be defended, others that NATO membership would provoke the Russians.<sup>15</sup> Some even suggested that the Scandinavians, rather than NATO, should be the guarantors of the Balts' security. The Swedish government realised that the best solution, both for the Balts and for Sweden, was for NATO to underwrite the security of the Baltics. To those involved in Sweden's Baltic policies, this demonstrated how Sweden's interests and security were interlinked with those of its neighbours.

The third factor was the evolution of the nature of international peace-support operations, which changed with the end of the Cold War. Operations in the Balkans were no longer traditional peace-keeping operations as in Sinai, but interventions in an ongoing conflict, which were dangerous and which commanded attention. Moreover, Sweden took part not only for altruistic reasons, but also to protect national interests – the Wars of the Yugoslav Secession had brought record numbers of refugees to Sweden. Sweden found itself a stakeholder in the European security order and realised that the threats to this order had to be tackled in partnership with others.

This dovetailed very well with the fourth factor, which was cooperation with NATO through the Partnership for Peace (PfP). NATO's command of operations in the Balkans (from late 1995 onwards) helped legitimise both this cooperation and the efforts for interoperability, which by its own logic snowballed until the Swedish armed forces had made the transition to using NATO's standards and procedures.

Finally, the fifth factor consisted of revelations that had surfaced from the early 1990s onwards concerning Sweden's covert military ties to the West during the Cold War. An official commission revealed that preparations for wartime cooperation with the US, the UK, Norway and Denmark – and for receiving help – had indeed been undertaken, and

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14 Lars Peter Fredén, *Återkomster: svensk säkerhetspolitik och de baltiska ländernas första år i självständighet: 1991-1994* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2006).

15 Robert Dalsjö, "Are the Baltics Defensible?: On the Utility of and Prospects for a Capability for Self-Defence.", *RUSI JOURNAL*, vol. 143, no. 4, August 1998, pp. 40-44.

with the government's permission. Moreover, the commission found proof of the US having decided to come to Sweden's assistance, should the country be attacked.<sup>16</sup> These findings, which were later followed up by researchers and journalists, helped to deflate the cherished myth of pristine neutrality and of a self-sufficient Sweden that took care of its own security.<sup>17</sup>

The years around the millennium were dominated by liberal euphoria, in Sweden as elsewhere throughout the West. As war in Europe was no longer deemed possible, armed forces were not needed for national defence, only for overseas interventions and for peace-support operations, which were now seen as the main task. Defence expenditure was cut from 2.3% of GDP in 1992 to 1.3% in 2009. The structure of the forces was cut even more drastically; during the same period, the number of army manoeuvre battalions plummeted from 62 to 7, air force squadrons were cut from 20 to 4, and combat ships diminished from 42 to 11.<sup>18</sup> A strategic time-out was declared, under which support structures were streamlined for peacetime conditions, while only a handful of units – for service overseas – had to be ready at all.

As a result, most of the remaining units in the army existed only on paper and the whole structure was much like an empty shell. With the force structure shrinking, so did the yearly intake of conscripts to the point where only 15% of young men served, which undermined the legitimacy of the system. Moreover, conscription was increasingly seen as a relic, as conscripts could only be deployed for national defence, which was considered unnecessary, and not for international operations, which were the main and only event.

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16 NSC 6006/1; *Had there been...*

17 Dalsjö, *Life-Line Lost*, and Mikael Holmström, *Den dolda alliansen: Sveriges hemliga NATO-förbindelser* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2011).

18 Ola Hedin, *Försvarets förutsättningar – en ESO-rapport om erfarenheter från 20 år av försvarsreformer* ESO-rapport 2011:2, (Stockholm: Finansdepartementet, 2011).

## DEFENCE REFORM

The Social Democrats lost the parliamentary elections in 2006 and a centre-right coalition – dominated by the “new conservatives” under Fredrik Reinfeldt – took the reins.<sup>19</sup> The new government kept up the practice of having a Defence Commission with representatives of all parties in Parliament as a forum for deliberation.<sup>20</sup> The previous Commission had applied a post-modern perspective, but the first report of the new Commission was more traditional and hard-nosed, not least in its attitude towards Russia.<sup>21</sup>

Most importantly, the Commission asserted unanimously that it could not envisage a military threat that would only affect Sweden or another single country in the region. It even went one step further and issued a “declaration of solidarity”, according to which Sweden would not remain passive should another EU Member State or another Nordic country be struck by disaster or by an attack. Sweden expected these countries to take similar action should it be likewise affected. This declaration soon became government policy through its inclusion in official government statements.<sup>22</sup>

The way in which Sweden would help in the event that a sister nation was threatened would still be a sovereign national decision, made on a case-by-case basis. But the declaration of solidarity nonetheless represented a break with the almost 200-year-old tradition of seeing Sweden’s security in isolation, if need be at the expense of its neighbours.<sup>23</sup>

The second report, published in June 2008, mainly dealt with the future shape of Sweden’s armed forces. This repeated the first report’s declaration of solidarity, but with the important addition that this meant that Sweden must be able to give and receive

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19 Reinfeldt and his team successfully moved the Conservative Party towards the political centre to appeal to more voters, in a manner similar to how Tony Blair had changed the British Labour Party. Consequently the party was also rebranded as the “New Conservatives”.

20 The Defence Commission should not be confused with the Defence Committee of Parliament. The Defence Commission is temporary and appointed by the government, although it includes parliamentarians.

21 *Säkerhet i samverkan: Försvarsberedningens omvärldsanalys*, Ds 2007:46 (Stockholm: Regeringskansliet/Fö, 2007). Downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/306/a/93589>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

22 Regeringens deklARATION vid 2008 års utrikespolitiska debatt i Riksdagen onsdagen den 13 februari 2008; Statement of Government Policy 16 September 2008. Downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/108/a/111081>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

23 Sweden has a rather sordid history of boldly declaring solidarity with its Nordic brethren, but then chickening out when the chips are down. These events are largely forgotten in Sweden, but not so in the neighbouring countries. See Krister Wahlbäck, “Nordic Solidarity – a Problematic Affair”, in Bo Hugemark (ed.) *Friends in Need: Towards a Swedish Strategy of Solidarity with her Neighbours* (Stockholm: the Royal Academy of War Sciences, 2012).

military assistance. This may seem a small step in the grand scheme of things, but given the past, it was a giant leap for Swedish declaratory doctrine.<sup>24</sup>

Less than two months after the Commission's final report was published, Russia's attack on Georgia triggered a shift in the debate over defence policy, clearly in favour of tasks closer to home than Afghanistan. The concern was not so much a Russian invasion of Sweden but rather the military threat against some of Sweden's neighbours.

The defence reform bill was prepared in the Ministry of Defence, on the basis of the Commission's report, which had the support of all parties, taking Russia's attack on Georgia into account, and in dialogue with the high command of the armed forces.<sup>25</sup> The bill had a number of guiding lights, chiefly as follows:

- One set of forces for all tasks at home, in the vicinity of Sweden, and far overseas.
- All units to be fully manned, trained and equipped.
- An all-volunteer force, with a mix of standing units and call-up units with volunteer reservists. The air force and the navy were to be a standing force, the army mixed. Conscription should be kept dormant.
- Reintroduction of a corps of non-commissioned officers.
- Thriftier procurement principles and streamlined support structures.

While the number of units would decline slightly compared with the previous system, decision-makers hoped that the structure as a whole would be more powerful and more readily available for actual use. No new funding was added – the rebranded “new conservatives” had made a point of abandoning old darlings, such as a strong national defence. Moreover, the structure enacted by parliament was still one designed for occasional expeditionary operations and for low running costs in peacetime. Not for war.

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24 Försvar i användning Ds 2008:48 (Stockholm: Regeringskansliet/Fö, 2008). Downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/10715/a/107264>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

25 Some marginal reservations were expressed by a couple of parties, and by dissident parliamentarians.

## SNAGS IN IMPLEMENTING THE REFORM

As is often the case, progressing from words to deeds proved difficult. The Great Defence Reform of 2009 was based on optimistic assumptions, and underfinanced. The original plan was for the new structure to be up and running by 2014, and for the reform to be paid for by efficiencies and organisational streamlining. But costs had been underestimated and efficiency savings overestimated. As the “new conservatives” would not allocate more money, the implementation slipped.

The recruitment of full-time professional soldiers initially went well. But the bulk of the army was to be made up of part-time soldiers, and in this respect the recruitment did not go as smoothly. Moreover, basic items like food and lodgings for the soldiers had not been resolved; higher than anticipated turnover rates meant higher costs and lower readiness. Such problems should have been anticipated on the basis of experiences from other countries that had made the transition to an all-volunteer force.

Not surprisingly, there were also cost overruns in procurement projects, leading to further delays. This contributed to prolonging full implementation into the 2020s, a time period during which the Swedish Armed Forces would already be confronted by the need to replace or upgrade several big-ticket defence systems and platforms bought in the 1990s. This shortfall was apparent even before the government had decided on the early replacement of the new Gripen fighters with an even newer version of the Gripen, but without providing any substantial new funding. Chief of Defence (CHOD) General Göransson warned that he would have to disband the whole army or the navy to pay for the new planes, but to no avail.<sup>26</sup>

An important element of the defence reform of 2009 was that contingency planning for crises and war was taken up again, after a ten-year hiatus. Another important element of the reform was the provision that all units had to be combat-ready at short notice. This was a substantial change given the lack of readiness in previous years.

However, this requirement was not taken seriously by a defence establishment that was both jaded by impossible demands in the past and set in its ways. Moreover, these steps towards a posture more suited to warfare were not matched by any measures to ensure their implementation, any changes in the organisation, or any changes to the management or budgeting principles. These were still geared towards keeping the cost of peacetime operations low, and to the occasional peace-support operation.<sup>27</sup>

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26 On this decision, see Birgitta Forsberg, “För SAAB och fosterland”, *Affärsvärlden*, 26 Feb 2014.

27 Cf. Robert Dalsjö, “Arméchefen och verkligheten”, SvD/Säkerhetsrådet Feb. 5, 2016. <http://www.svd.se/robert-dalsjo-armedchefen-och-verkligheten>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

## THE ONE-WEEK DEFENCE DEBATE AND THE RUSSIAN THREAT

In the years that followed, the public debate increasingly reflected concerns over the state of Sweden's defences and over developments in Russia. The emergence of a military blogosphere made it hard to keep a lid on the real state of affairs. The national audit office issued a series of scathing reports and the CHOD reported that from 2015 there would be a yearly shortfall of 4 billion kronor, without which the defence reform could not be implemented. But the centre-right government dismissed such concerns.

In late December 2012, a lively debate over defence policy was – perhaps unintentionally – triggered by an interview with the CHOD in which he, in an aside, referred to the fact that the armed forces could only defend one part of Sweden for one week, and only against a minor attack. The statement was not about current capabilities, but the capabilities the armed forces would have if and when the new organisation were implemented. Until then, Sweden's defence capabilities remained even lower.

Thus, Sweden was evidently very much dependent on outside assistance, and rapid assistance at that. But where would such assistance come from? The only possibility was NATO, or its members. Help from the West had been part of Sweden's security calculus during the Cold War, and it still was. However, NATO's secretary-general, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, caused a rumpus when he told the Swedes that: "Either you are a member or you are not, and only members are covered by collective defence". Further fuel for the most intense defence debate in 20 years was provided by reports that Russian strike aircraft had conducted mock attacks on Sweden, without the Swedish air force being scrambled.

The debate highlighted the fact that prompt outside help had become a central factor in Swedish security, but that no steps had been taken to arrange for such help. Clearly, the security calculus and preparations were not in alignment. Shortly thereafter, polls showed a jump in public support for NATO membership by ten percentage points.

The debate also showed that something important had changed in Sweden's relations with NATO. Hitherto, it had been assumed that it was Sweden that set the limits on how far cooperation could proceed. Now, it was increasingly the Alliance that set the limits on how close a partner could get. Furthermore, Sweden's status as a troop contributor to NATO's operations in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya had permitted access to many committees and staffs within the Alliance. But as such operations were being wound down and replaced instead by exercises gravitating towards collective defence, it seemed that the cooperative fora might be closed. Sweden would have to earn a new place as a partner in a new context. Thus, previous political qualms among Social Democrats were soon brushed aside and Sweden decided to join the Response Forces Pool that forms part of the NATO Response Force (as Finland had done five years earlier), just to stay in the partnership game and to remain relevant.

## IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Russia's land grab and annexation of Crimea caused an eleventh-hour turnabout on the part of the conservative-led government, which only three months earlier had dismissed suggestions that something sinister was afoot in Russia, as well as suggestions that Sweden's defences were too weak. Suddenly, the government proposed increased spending to boost the armed forces, but only in the medium to long term.

The Defence Commission's report, published some weeks later, was almost unanimous in its sombre assessment. Europe had quickly become a more dangerous place, Russia was challenging the established security order, Sweden rapidly needed to boost its combat capabilities and to deepen cooperation with like-minded states. The principles of the defence reform of 2009 were still valid, but the reform was said to need adjusting on a number of points. Deeper defence cooperation with almost everyone (apart from Russia) was given the green light. Preparations were to be undertaken to facilitate receiving and providing military assistance. A Host Nation Support agreement (HNS) with NATO was to be concluded and incorporated into contingency planning.<sup>28</sup>

Two other seminal reports in the defence field were published in 2014. A research report by Krister Andrén, a former top-level defence advisor, delved into the issue of whether Sweden's armed forces could deter an aggressor. His assessment was that this task had been forgotten during the previous two decades. Moreover, Swedish society had become more vulnerable, while the capability to attack the country from a distance with cyber weapons and cruise missiles had grown. Trying to parry such actions was futile, he argued. Instead, the focus should be on a survivable capability to strike back, both inflicting pain on the aggressor and escalating the conflict to a level where it could not be ignored by the West. This would mean a fundamental conceptual shift for Sweden, from deterrence by denial, to deterrence by punishment and to deliberate escalation.<sup>29</sup>

The second report was commissioned by the centre-right government and the task was to assess the various types and forms of defence cooperation which Sweden was undertaking or considering. The task was entrusted to Tomas Bertelman, a former career diplomat. He concluded that there was a fundamental tension between the three aims for such cooperation: efficiency, solidarity and sovereignty. Moreover, while efficiencies could be achieved through deeper cooperation, for example with Finland, such cooperation could only make a marginal dent in the fundamental problem: the gap between what the armed forces were tasked with doing, and their capabilities. He also concluded that as the Kremlin most probably regards Sweden as part of the Western bloc, its present status was one that could incur the risks associated with an Alliance, but without having the security guarantees that membership would confer. He suggested

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28 *Försvaret av Sverige – Starkare försvar för en osäker tid* Ds 2014:20 (Stockholm: regeringskansliet/ Försvarsdepartementet, 2014). Downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/18692/a/240414>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

29 Krister Andrén, *Krigsavhållande tröskelförmåga – Försvarets glömda huvuduppgift?* FOI-R--3852–SE (Stockholm: FOI, 2014). Downloadable at <https://petterssonorg.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/fc3b6rsvarets-huvuduppgift.pdf>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

that a study be undertaken, preferably together with Finland, on the pros and cons of full formal NATO membership.<sup>30</sup>

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30 Bertelman, *Försvarspolitiskt samarbete...*

## A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT

While ambassador Bertelman was finalizing his report, an election replaced the centre-right government with a centre-left one. Despite drawing on the ex-Communist Left Party for support, the new government still did not have a majority in parliament. In their governmental programme, the new government unilaterally changed the wording on security policy, from the agreed-across-the-aisles formula that “military non-alignment has served us well” (past tense), to “military non-alignment continues to serve us well” (present tense). The government also stated that Sweden should not apply for membership of NATO.<sup>31</sup> Bertelman’s suggestion of a study of the pros and cons of membership was quietly shelved.

While in opposition, the left wing of the Social Democratic party and some nostalgic diplomats had nurtured a desire for a return to a more value-laden and Palme-like foreign policy. This meant less emphasis on hard security, on Europe, and on other issues and policies associated with Carl Bildt. Instead, more emphasis was placed on Africa and the Middle East, on the UN, and on feminism, human rights and disarmament. The new foreign minister, Margot Wallström, received much attention when she declared that Sweden’s foreign policy would henceforth be feminist.<sup>32</sup>

However, in a manner eerily reminiscent of the early 1980s, the political space for the pursuit of an activist agenda was seriously undercut by a dramatic submarine intrusion deep into the Stockholm archipelago. The intrusion was so blatant that Prime Minister Löfvén, Defence Minister Hultqvist and General Göransson appeared jointly on live television to break the news. Although the intruder’s nationality was not ascertained, the intrusion was widely seen as being consistent with Russia’s aggressive behaviour in recent years. The consequent hardening of the public mood limited the political space available for a values-based foreign policy and also opened up possibilities for a more hard-nosed approach towards security policy.

Moreover, Bertelman’s study in conjunction with the dramatic events made such an impact that two of the non-socialist parties changed their minds on the issue of NATO membership. Following their election defeat, the leaders of the Conservative Party had resigned. The new party leaders rapidly distanced themselves from policies that had failed, most dramatically on immigration and on defence. One aspect of this was that the Conservative Party, Sweden’s second largest, shifted to supporting NATO membership as soon as it was possible. One year earlier, this position had only been taken by the tiny Liberal Party. Now all four parties of the former government coalition supported membership of the Alliance, which meant that a change in the political weather had caused a dramatic shift in the political terrain.

This shift in the political mood pertained not only to the issue of NATO membership, but also to defence and security policy as a whole. The Social Democrats and their

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31 Regeringsförklaringen den 3 oktober 2014. Downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/informationsmaterial/2014/10/regeringsforklaringen-3-oktober-2014/>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

32 The magazine *Foreign Policy* put Wallström on a list of the most important foreign policy thinkers of 2014 for championing a feminist foreign policy.

no-nonsense defence minister, Peter Hultqvist, tried to head off the rush to NATO membership by arguing that the opposition was simply trying to deflect attention away from their own neglect and mismanagement of the armed forces. The main task at hand, he argued, was getting Sweden's own forces into shape. The result was – very unusually – a bidding contest whereby the major parties competed over who was most pro-defence. A focus for this competition was provided by the end-game in the negotiations over the five-year defence bill that was presented to parliament in early summer 2015, and for which the minority government needed opposition support.

However, the Ministry of Finance did not take part in this bidding contest, which meant that when the bill was finalized, the additions to the defence budget were rather modest. Still, it was significant that the defence budget was given a net increase for the first time in 20 years. Perhaps more important than these modest increases in defence spending were a number of steps taken in the bill, with the common feature being that they reflected a hard-nosed Atlanticist and realist perspective.<sup>33</sup>

As part of the agreement with the opposition that ensured passage of the bill in Parliament, an independent evaluation was also to be conducted of Sweden's different cooperative arrangements and memberships in the defence field, including with NATO. But at the insistence of the government, the task was not to involve an evaluation of the policy of military non-alignment. Ambassador Krister Bringéus was entrusted with this difficult and – for a serving diplomat – highly risky task.

The defence bill had not minced words about Russia being a threat and a bully, about the UN being powerless, and about the centrality of the transatlantic link and of cooperation with the US. Far from retreating from once controversial aspects of security policy – such as giving and taking international military assistance, or the declaration of solidarity – the centre-left government fortified and amplified them. Several former red lines were crossed and taboos were broken. Contingency plans were to be made for the reception and provision of military assistance, and practical preparations for this were to be undertaken. This was something that the previous government had not dared to do. The possibility of joint action with Finland in the event of crisis or war was broached, as was conducting exchanges on contingency plans with the Nordic nations and “other actors in our vicinity”, namely the US. A study was to be undertaken with the aim of identifying and removing any legal and constitutional obstacles to such cooperation.

Concerning the armed forces, the defence bill clearly reflected a sense of urgency and a bottom-up approach. The single most important task was to raise the combat-worthiness of the field units through exercises and the accelerated procurement of mundane but crucial items, such as radios, carbines and boots. Empty slots on the rosters were to be filled in the interim by assigning former conscripts. The island of Gotland, widely considered a tempting spot for Russia in the event of a conflict in the area, was to be garrisoned again. Civil defence planning was to be taken up again, after a 20-year hiatus. Notably, the development of a capability for offensive cyber warfare was also given the green light.

Shortly after the defence bill was passed, the government presented a white paper containing a draft law and regulations for the ratification and implementation of the

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33 Regeringens proposition 2014/2015: 109, Försvarspolitisk inriktning – Sveriges försvar 2016–2020.

HNS agreement concluded with NATO by the previous government. Instead of shelving the agreement, or going slow, the government wanted to apply it as soon as possible. The prospect of the HNS agreement becoming law alerted political forces opposed to Sweden's closer alignment with NATO and the US. Included among the themes that were forwarded was the fact that the agreement would open the door for "NATO bases" and nuclear weapons, and that it was a step towards membership. Such crude arguments made it possible for the defence minister to counter-attack with accusations of outright lies and disinformation. After a fair amount of drama and manoeuvring in parliament, the agreement was ratified by a huge majority and became law on July 1, 2016.

Despite the fact that his task was very similar to the one that Bertelman had just fulfilled, Krister Bringéus managed to rekindle the debate.<sup>34</sup> His findings, delivered in September of 2016, included the assessment that Russia's aggression and unpredictability had given rise to a new and dangerous security situation in Europe with the Baltic area as a hot spot, that Sweden would most probably be drawn into any conflict in the Baltic region, and that – bilateral arrangements notwithstanding – as Sweden was not a member of NATO, the country had been relegated to a kind of "twilight zone" when it came to contingency planning. Any coordination of Swedish and American military measures would have to be improvised in an emergency and would thus be less effective. Moreover, Sweden would not be able to contribute to overall deterrence in the region and to the maintenance of peace.<sup>35</sup> The report was duly shelved, as its conclusions did not suit the government.

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34 A very senior former diplomat even stated publicly that he thought the report would provide "an enema" for a constipated debate on security policy and NATO, Max Eskilsson, "Inför fredagens Natosläpp", [www.natobloggen.se](http://natobloggen.se), 5 Sept 2016, downloadable at <http://natobloggen.se/2016/09/05/infor-fredagens-natoslapp/>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

35 Bringéus, *Säkerhet i ny tid*.

## COULD THERE BE A SWEDISH MIDDLE WAY?

In the 1930s and 1950s there was much talk of the Swedish economic and social system as a third or middle way between the extremes of American capitalism and Soviet communism.<sup>36</sup> Since the late summer of 2015, it has been possible to see the outline of a new kind of Swedish middle way in security policy, half-way between some version of traditional neutrality and NATO membership. Observers of the political scene in Sweden speak of a “Hultqvist doctrine”, which contrasts markedly with the foreign policy pursued by his colleague at the foreign office.

This “doctrine” contains several elements:

- a strong emphasis on the Transatlantic Link and support for a rules-based security order;
- a tough line on Russia’s transgressions of international law – especially regarding Crimea;
- a focus on deterrence and on a stronger national defence capability;
- a “No” to NATO membership, but
- deeper military cooperation with Finland, the other Nordic states, the US and the Alliance.<sup>37</sup>

Hultqvist clearly rules out NATO membership as “not being on the agenda”, but – notably – does so without digging any political trenches that might impede future movement on the issue. Moreover, his followers argue, NATO is too bureaucratic and cumbersome to rely on in a crisis; better then to cooperate directly with America, the real source of power. Hence – although this is not stated openly – they also hope to bypass the weak and unreliable European allies.<sup>38</sup> The late and legendary Ingemar Dörfer once reportedly made his way into the inner sanctum of the Pentagon (with Carl Bildt in tow) through the laundry entrance. The question is whether Peter Hultqvist can sneak Sweden under America’s protective umbrella in a similar fashion.

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36 Cf. Marquis Childs, *Sweden: The Middle Way* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).

37 Annika Nordgren Christensen, “Hultqvistdoktrinen”, blog entry August 31, 2015 at <http://annikanc.com>; Peter Wolodarski, “Sverige riskerar hamna i en farlig gråzon”, *Dagens Nyheter* September 9, 2015; Carl Hvenmark Nilsson, “Sweden’s Evolving Relationship with NATO and its Consequences for the Baltic Sea Region”, blog entry at [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org) October 7, 2015; Armed Forces’ press statement on Baltops, May 20, 2015 (<http://www.forsvarsmakten.se/sv/aktuellt/2015/05/forsvarsmakten-bygger-sakerhet-tillsammans-med-andra/>). All links last accessed 25 April 2017.

38 Prop. 2014/15:109, throughout, but especially chapters 4 and 5; Samförståndsavtal med Nato om värdlandsstöd, Ds 2015:39; Åsa Lindestam, Olle Thorell, “Nato vore för byråkratiskt vid kris”, *Västmanlands Läns Tidning* 18/8 2015; Peter Hultqvist, “Sveriges militära samarbete med Nato måste fördjupas”, *Dagens Nyheter* 30/8; Interview with Peter Hultqvist on Radio Sweden, channel 1, September 19, 2015.

In a manner which seems truly amazing to observers of Sweden's ritualised security policy scene, Hultqvist's "No" to NATO membership seems to have mollified the party's left wing and other remaining neutralists sufficiently to make room for the pursuit of extensive direct military cooperation with America. In a similar manner, deepening military cooperation with Finland also serves the purpose of politically legitimising such cooperation with "others", namely the US.

Regarding the political battles over security policy since he took office, Hultqvist seems to have lost only two: on whether to give a muscular or milquetoast response to the French request for assistance against ISIS in Syria, and on whether to support a vote in the UN to outlaw nuclear weapons. In Finland, some are concerned that Sweden and America have already revived the secret relationship and secret security guarantees of the 1950s and 1960s, leaving Finland uncomfortably alone with the bear.

Whether such a new middle way is a possible and desirable way forward for Sweden, and also for Finland, was a hotly debated topic within the Atlanticist community in Sweden and Finland during 2015 and 2016, although this debate is seldom conducted in public.<sup>39</sup> What follows is an attempt at an honest rendition of the arguments of both camps, the Bilateralists and the Mainstreamers.

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39 Two notable exceptions, one by an American guest researcher in Finland, are Leo Michel, *Bilateral defence treaties with the United States: Not an alternative to NATO*, FIIA Comment 19/2016, available at [http://www.fia.fi/en/publication/618/bilateral\\_defence\\_treaties\\_with\\_the\\_united\\_states/](http://www.fia.fi/en/publication/618/bilateral_defence_treaties_with_the_united_states/); and Johan Wiktorin, "Behåll alliansfriheten", *Vårt Försvar* 2016: 3.

## THE BILATERALIST CAMP

Proponents argue that formal NATO membership is currently impossible due to domestic political factors in both countries, and also that accession might encounter resistance from some members of the Alliance. Given this, focussing single-mindedly on the membership issue means making perfect the enemy of good. Better then to go for pragmatic but informal arrangements that can yield tangible benefits for both sides quickly.

They also argue that the Pentagon is likely to be interested in such an approach as the US military deals with strategic realities and needs to shore up its posture in northern Europe. Furthermore, it is an open secret that the US is undertaking parallel planning for contingencies in Europe, one set of plans involving NATO and one set involving the US, but also including some allies. Most likely, there could also be a role for Sweden and Finland in such plans. Moreover, most European members of NATO are more of a burden than an asset, politically as well as militarily; if you can strike a deal with America, without NATO as a middle-man, so much the better.<sup>40</sup> The credibility of this view was – up to the US election in November 2016 – strengthened by the apparent success of Sweden and Finland in pursuing an ever closer defence relationship with the US, and by recent statements delivered by visiting US/NATO officials that can be interpreted as amounting to informal security guarantees.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, there have also been widespread fears in Finland that – if Finland joined NATO – any Alliance decision to actually come to Finland's assistance during a crisis could fall victim to NATO's requirement for consensus. Then, it is feared, Finland would have antagonised Russia by joining NATO, but would still be left to face the music alone when it mattered.<sup>42</sup>

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40 The most elaborate, outspoken and solid example of this view in the public domain is Stefan Forss, Pekka Holopainen, *Breaking the Nordic Defense Deadlock* (Carlisle, PA: US War College Press/SSI, 2015).

41 US Deputy Secretary of Defense visited Sweden, downloadable at <http://www.government.se/articles/2016/05/us-deputy-secretary-of-defence-visited-sweden/>; Statement of Intent between the Secretary of Defense of the United States of America and the Minister of Defence of Sweden, June 8, 2016, downloadable at [http://www.government.se/49d2af/globalassets/government/dokument/forsvarsdepartementet/statement-of-intent-swe\\_us-20160608\\_signed.pdf](http://www.government.se/49d2af/globalassets/government/dokument/forsvarsdepartementet/statement-of-intent-swe_us-20160608_signed.pdf); "Biden: Sverige är okränkbart territorium – punkt", *Svenska Dagbladet* 25 Aug 2016; "NATO's Vershbow: Alliance would help Finland in Baltic crisis situation", YLE 25 Sept, 2016, downloadable at [http://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/natos\\_vershbow\\_alliance\\_would\\_help\\_finland\\_in\\_baltic\\_crisis\\_situation/9190830](http://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/natos_vershbow_alliance_would_help_finland_in_baltic_crisis_situation/9190830). All links last accessed 25 April 2017.

42 This is a concern, expressed by several interlocutors in Finland, which is all the more powerful as it chimes with the Finnish narrative of not being helped during the Second World War.

## THE MAINSTREAM CAMP

Those who advocate full NATO membership as soon as possible argue that this would give Sweden a seat at the table as well as solid security guarantees and credible contingency planning. If Sweden remained outside the Alliance and weakly defended, it would be a source of instability in the region. While the benefits of informal cooperation may be tangible and rapid, they could also be blurry, uncertain and ephemeral. If help was forthcoming in a crisis, it could arrive too late, and the Swedes would not have any say in the crucial decisions.<sup>43</sup>

Another argument in favour of formal membership over bilateral arrangements is that any such arrangements or assurances could be as easily withdrawn as they were granted. Sweden's position would thus be analogous to that of a kept woman, at the mercy of the vagaries and whims of US domestic politics and of the executive branch, without the stability that a treaty ratified by the Senate would provide.<sup>44</sup> One could also add that any bilateral Swedish-US cooperation that was not formalised could become marginalised and forgotten in the long run, as was the covert Swedish-US cooperation during the Cold War.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, the benefits of informal and bilateral arrangements would distract attention away from the pursuit of full membership, and at a time when public opinion is shifting in favour of full NATO membership. Informal cooperation might thus amount to the equivalent of a “middle-income trap” and Sweden might thus forfeit a historic opportunity to fully and permanently join the Western camp. In this last argument of the pro-membership camp one can detect an ideological element on the part of some participants in the Swedish debate. It is not only in the anti-NATO/pro-neutrality camp that stances are underpinned by issues of identity and identity politics. Also among some Atlanticists, who have long had to suppress their desire to fully “come home” to the West, emotions seem to have super-charged the debate, leading to a tendency to sweepingly dismiss all other solutions apart from full membership.

As a result, this semi-covert debate among Nordic Atlanticists has at times become a heated and very predictable dialogue of the deaf, despite being conducted by intelligent people on both sides. In the process, some of the finer but important points of the issue have not been appreciated.

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43 Frank Belfrage et al., “Låt inte rysskräcken hindra oss från att gå med i Nato”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 6 Jan 2016. This op-ed by 25 prominent Swedes, including a dozen former ambassadors, probably shook the establishment, as the MoFA used to be a solid bastion of the policy of neutrality or non-alignment. See also Mike Winnerstig, “Varför Sverige i Nato?”, *Vårt Försvär* 4/2016.

44 The kept woman analogy has not been made in the public debate but it is relevant, although it might seem harsh.

45 In *Life-Line Lost*, I not only reveal the extent and depth of Sweden's covert military ties to the West during the Cold War, and how they clashed with the declaratory doctrine of “neutrality”, but I also show that these ties waned considerably from the late 1960s, to the point where they had effectively disappeared by the mid-1980s. My explanation for this is that the more strident and dogmatic doctrine on neutrality policy introduced by Olof Palme in the late 1960s made the maintenance of such covert military ties to the US increasingly politically risky. On this specific point, my assessment differs from that of Mikael Holmström.

## COULD NATO BE DEADLOCKED IN A CRISIS?

Part of the impetus for the pursuit of bilateral ties seems to stem from concerns that NATO's decision-making might be delayed or deadlocked in the event of a serious crisis or conflict with Russia, leaving exposed allies in the lurch. Although the requirement for unanimity is not written into the Washington Treaty, except when it comes to inviting new members, decisions in NATO are traditionally taken by consensus.<sup>46</sup> This, coupled with the fact that the requirement for consensus proved to be an impediment in contingencies involving Turkey in 1991 and 2003, and Kosovo in 1999, makes such concerns understandable. After all, even founding member Norway obviously does not feel assured that a Russian land grab in northernmost Norway would not be considered "a local quarrel".<sup>47</sup> Moreover, similar concerns figure very prominently in former deputy SACEUR Sir Richard Shirreff's recent book about a fictitious war with Russia over the Baltic states.<sup>48</sup>

However, those who think in this manner overlook the fact that Article 5 of the Washington Treaty contains a back-stop in case consensus can't be achieved. It stipulates that an armed attack on any one of the signatories should be considered as an armed attack on all of them, and that they should "individually and in concert with the other Parties" provide assistance to the party under attack.

The decision to come to the assistance of an ally under attack could thus either be a decision by the Alliance as a whole, requiring consensus, or a decision taken individually by each of the signatories. If consensus could not be achieved for some reason, or was delayed, allies could and should still come to each other's assistance individually. In so doing, states can cooperate with each other, thus in effect creating a coalition of the willing within the framework of the Alliance.

Moreover, key officials such as NATO's supreme commander in Europe are double-hatted and could swiftly change to acting in a national capacity. In this manner, a military response to an attack on a NATO member cannot be blocked by a lack of consensus in the North Atlantic Council, provided that action is supported by the allies that own the necessary military assets and the corresponding real estate.

Reportedly, this possibility of circumventing recalcitrant allies by way of parallel planning using national lines of command played a major role in finally opening the door for NATO contingency planning for the Baltic states after the Georgian war of 2008, which some allies (reportedly Germany) opposed. The possibility that the US, Poland

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46 Significantly, decisions in NATO do not involve voting. This and other finer points about NATO decision-making are explained and analysed in Leo Michel, "NATO Decision-making: Au Revoir to the Consensus Rule?", *Strategic Forum* Nr 202, August 2003 (NDU/INSS); and Loren Traugutt, "Is Consensus Still Necessary Within Nato?", *NDC Research report* 07/16 – June 2016.

47 This is mostly said in roundabout ways in public, but is clear from Sverre Diesen, "Kampfly eller haerstyrker – hva betyr 'et balansert forsvar'?", *Norsk Militaert Tidsskrift* 2:2016.

48 General Sir Richard Shirreff, *War with Russia* (London: Coronet, 2016). In this context, one could also mention the concerns in the years around 1960 about the Alliance's response in case of a Soviet land grab of Hamburg or Finnmark.

and others were ready to go ahead on their own made the Germans finally agree to NATO planning. This possibility should allay any legitimate fears in Sweden or Finland of milquetoast allies being able to block a decision on contingency planning for Finland, or on timely help for Finland in a pinch.

This possibility could also square the circle concerning a weak spot in the pro-NATO camp's line of reasoning in Sweden, a weakness that the anti-NATO camp has apparently not yet discovered. The pro-NATO camp gleefully points to a contradiction in the reasoning of the opponents of NATO – that Russia is held to be so reliably peaceful that Swedish NATO membership is unnecessary, yet it is at the same time so dangerous that we should not take the risk of incurring its wrath by joining the Alliance.<sup>49</sup> Both of these statements could conceivably be true, but not at the same time.

However, the arguments of the pro-membership camp often contain two statements that seem to contradict each other in a similar manner: As a member of NATO, Sweden could not be railroaded into taking part in someone else's war, as all decisions in the Alliance are taken by consensus. But at the same time, as members we would have iron-clad guarantees of prompt allied help in case we were under attack. These statements contradict each other. However, if you factor in that under Article 5 action to assist an ally can be taken either individually, or in concert with other allies, this contradiction can be bridged and the circle squared.

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49 Aaron Korewa, "Hirdmans paradox", Aug, 10, 2016, [www.natobloggen.se](http://www.natobloggen.se), <http://natobloggen.se/2016/08/10/hirdmanparadoxen/>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

## AN ASPECT NOT CONSIDERED

A possible objection to Hultqvist's middle way, which has yet to surface in the public debate, is that Sweden – by pursuing bilateral ties and ultimately also bilateral security guarantees from the US – might actually undercut NATO as a multilateral organisation and contribute to the erosion of the Alliance's viability.<sup>50</sup>

On the same occasion that Alyson Bailes made the comment about Swedes still being neutral, she also remarked that discussions in Sweden on security policy are self-centred, almost lacking consideration of how Sweden's choices might affect the security of others.

This should not really be surprising, given the legacy of small-state Realism. It is most probably wise for a small state not to count on positive systemic effects of acts of unselfish do-goodery. That said, it may also be wise for a small state to consider the potential negative systemic effects of blatantly selfish actions that undercut multilateral structures and regimes. As small, export-dependent states with a big bad neighbour, Sweden and Finland both have strong stakes in the current system of multilateral regimes established by the US after the Second World War. A renationalisation of security policies or a breakdown of trading regimes would be a major and unmitigated disaster for both countries, although this is seldom mentioned or taken into account.<sup>51</sup>

The dangers of bilateralising relations should be a weightier concern at present, when multilateral regimes in several arenas are under considerable strain, to put it mildly. Russia has dealt a mortal blow to the cooperative and rules-based post-Cold War order in Europe, and is discarding arms control agreements. In Asia, China is openly challenging both the post-1945 order and the Law of the Sea. On trade, the Doha Round is dead, TTP and TTIP are floundering and free trade is widely unpopular. The EU is challenged internally by Brexit, by the euro crisis, and by the rise of populism, nationalism and what François Heisbourg calls *souverainisme*.<sup>52</sup> Externally, the EU is challenged by Russia, by turmoil in the Middle East, and by mass migration.

If these trends continue unabated, there is likely to be a tipping point somewhere, after which the forces of anarchy will overwhelm the forces of order. We do not know where this point may occur, but in all likelihood it exists, just as in climate change models.

This is happening while America is becoming increasingly wary and tired of carrying the burdens of empire. Donald Trump is just providing us with the trailer-park version of an

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50 The sole exception to the non-mention of this aspect is Leo Michel, who briefly touches on this aspect in *Bilateral defence treaties...*

51 Robert Dalsjö and Stefan Forss, "Nato luo perustan Euroopan turvallisudelle" [Nato creates the basis for the security of Europe], op-ed, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 6 December 2003, downloadable at <http://www.hs.fi/paakirjoitukset/art-2000004187136.html?share=14dd7fe9a15b2de54b56ed5596869f3e>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

52 François Heisbourg, "Brexit and European Security", *Survival* June-July 2016.

undercurrent that runs across America and is getting stronger: America is being taken to the cleaners by selfish and lazy allies and partners who do not pull their own weight.<sup>53</sup>

As seen from Washington, the world is brimming with supplicants pleading for attention and assistance. One of the things that mitigates this state of affairs, at least in Europe, is the fact that the US to a considerable degree can deal with some 30+ allies and partners in the region as a collective through NATO and the Partnership for Peace.<sup>54</sup>

Doing what is possible and expedient is sometimes the only viable alternative in the short term. But it would seem wise for Stockholm and Helsinki to also consider how their quest for bilateral defence ties might weaken and undermine the greater whole on which their security and prosperity ultimately depends.

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53 For more sophisticated versions of this message, see Dov Zakheim, "The Trump Phenomenon and American Isolationism – the Strange Nature of the 2016 Presidential Campaign", *Kungl. Krigsvetenskapsakademiens Handlingar och Tidskrift*, 2016:2; Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine", *The Atlantic* April 2016; Michael Birnbaum, "Gates rebukes European allies in farewell speech", *The Washington Post* 10 June 2011, downloadable at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/gates-rebukes-european-allies-in-farewell-speech/2011/06/10/AG9tKeOH\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.01106677baf](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/gates-rebukes-european-allies-in-farewell-speech/2011/06/10/AG9tKeOH_story.html?utm_term=.01106677baf). Last accessed 25 April 2017.

54 Cf. Michel, *Bilateral...*

## HAND IN HAND OR LEAP-FROGGING?

Since the mid-1990s, the deepening bilateral cooperation between Sweden and Finland in defence and security policy has in large part been driven by mutual fear and suspicion. Cooperation “hand in hand” can be seen as a mutual insurance policy against the other party suddenly running off to join NATO. The fact that such fears are common in Finland is evident in the many references made to the manner in which Sweden suddenly decided to reverse policies and join the EU in the early 1990s, which was done without consulting Finland. On the other side of the Gulf of Bothnia, Swedish fears emanate from the fact that Finnish political culture places a comparatively higher value on national security, places more trust in elected leaders and has less need for consensus. Thus, the mirror image of Finland’s fears of Sweden doing yet another “EU switchback”, is of Finland doing a quick change of sides, as it very skillfully did in 1992. At that time, Finland simply declared null and void the Friendship and Cooperation Agreement with the Soviet Union and the military clauses of the Paris Peace Agreement – which for decades were the linchpins of not only Finland’s security policy but also of Urho Kekkonen’s unhealthy grip on domestic policy.

For a couple of years now, Finland has been markedly more cautious than Sweden in pursuing closer ties with the US and in antagonising Russia – while still remaining loyal to EU sanctions on Russia. There has been an impression of Finland dragging its feet and thus running the risk of being left behind as Sweden pursues closer ties to the US.<sup>55</sup> Some have speculated that the reason for this might be that Putin has threatened his Finnish counterpart Sauli Niinistö with nasty consequences if Finland pursues a more Westerly path.

The fact that something of this kind took place during the winter of 2015/2016 seems clear from the flap over asylum-seekers coming to Finland by way of Russia. Although the flow of migrants was small in number by Swedish or German standards, it was a reminder of the fact that there are millions of migrant workers in Russia without proper permits. The not so subtle message was that these migrants could easily be rounded up and sent to the Russo-Finnish border. Moreover, some of President Niinistö’s speeches from 2015 and early 2016 had a tone reminiscent of October 1939, preparing the country for very hard times ahead.<sup>56</sup>

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55 Mats Johansson, “Nato-debatten: Dags att säga hej då, Finland?” [The Nato debate: Time to say Bye-bye Finland?], [www.svd.se](http://www.svd.se) 26 Mar 2016, downloadable at <http://www.svd.se/natodebatten-ar-det-dags-att-saga-hejda-finland>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

56 Speech by President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö at the Ambassador Seminar 25 August 2015, downloadable at <http://www.tpk.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=333284&nodeid=44810&contentlan=2&culture=en-US>; Speech by President of the Republic Sauli Niinistö at the Opening of Parliament on 3 February 2016, downloadable at <http://www.tpk.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=341376&nodeid=44810&contentlan=2&culture=en-US>. All links last accessed 25 April 2017.

But something – as yet unknown – seems to have happened during the spring of 2016 that broke the spell of paralysis in Finland.<sup>57</sup> In April, an independent panel of respected Finnish and foreign experts published a report assessing the effects of NATO membership for Finland, a report which had been commissioned by Finland’s Foreign Ministry.<sup>58</sup> Widely expected to argue for a status quo policy, the report surprised by unequivocally saying that membership of NATO (together with Sweden) would improve Finland’s national security status. The crux was said to lie in the accession process, which was likely to draw Russia’s ire, and to achieve coordination with Sweden.

In the summer of 2016, this was followed by two official reports that set new standards for Finnish statements criticising Russia, with high-profile participation in NATO’s summit in Warsaw, and with frantic Finnish efforts to catch up with Sweden vis-à-vis bilateral defence ties to the US.<sup>59</sup>

At least twice during the 20<sup>th</sup> century Finland has proved very apt at swiftly changing geopolitical sides, skillfully choosing the right moment for cutting ties with the losing party and jumping to the other side. This kind of political dexterity was demonstrated in 1944 and then again in the early 1990s, and arguably also in 1917 and 1918/19.<sup>60</sup> One of the main architects of the shift in the early 1990s was also one of the experts on the panel that produced the surprising report which reduced the whole NATO issue to one of modalities of safely switching status. Swedes who feel confident that they have a head

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57 One can of course speculate on possible contributing causes, such as the debate in Sweden going into overdrive with the op-ed by 25 notables advocating NATO membership, and with Mats Johansson’s column about “Bye-bye Finland”, but that would only be speculation. Belfrage et al., “Låt inte rysskräcken...”; Johansson, Natodebatten.

58 The effects of Finland’s possible NATO membership – an assessment (Helsinki: Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2016), downloadable at <http://formin.finland.fi/public/download.aspx?ID=157408&GUID={71D08E6C-3168-439F-9C31-0326D1014C26}>. Last accessed 25 April 2017.

59 Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy, Prime Minister’s Office Publications 9/2016 (Helsinki: Prime Minister’s Office, 2016), downloadable at <http://formin.finland.fi/public/default.aspx?contentid=348060&nodeid=49298&contentlan=2&culture=en-US>; “Finnish, Swedish leaders invited into ‘inner circle’ at NATO summit”, www.yle.fi July 2016, downloadable at [http://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finnish\\_swedish\\_leaders\\_invited\\_into\\_inner\\_circle\\_at\\_nato\\_summit/9002688](http://yle.fi/uutiset/osasto/news/finnish_swedish_leaders_invited_into_inner_circle_at_nato_summit/9002688); Toivo Martikainen, Katri Pynnöniemi, Sinikukka Saari & Ulkopoliittisen instituutin työryhmä, *Venäjän muuttuva rooli Suomen lähialueilla*, Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 34/2016 (Helsinki: Valtioneuvoston kanslia, 2016), downloadable at [http://www.fia.fi/fi/publication/607/venajan\\_muuttuva\\_rooli\\_suomen\\_lahialueilla/](http://www.fia.fi/fi/publication/607/venajan_muuttuva_rooli_suomen_lahialueilla/). This report was semi-official in that it was written by analysts at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, but published by the Cabinet Offices. The United States and Finland Sign Statement of Intent, Oct 7, 2016, downloadable at <https://fi.usembassy.gov/united-states-finland-sign-statement-intent/>.

60 Waiting for the right moment to jump from the comradeship-in-arms with Germany, and then rapidly seizing the opportunity is the central theme of Henrik Meinander’s excellent book on Finland in 1944. Henrik Meinander, *Finland 1944: Krig, samhälle, känslolandskap* (Helsingfors: Söderströms, 2009). As for the early 1990s, see René Nyberg. “Ni har vidrört vid VSB-avtalet”, in Mats Bergquist, Alf Johansson (ed.), *Säkerhetspolitik och historia: Essäer om stormaktspolitiken och Norden under sjuttio år – Vänbok till Krister Wahlbäck* (Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 2007).

start in the race to Washington had also better consider the possibility that they may yet be overtaken.