

REBUILDING SWEDEN'S CRISIS PREPAREDNESS

LACK OF CLARITY IMPEDES IMPLEMENTATION

Mariette Hägglund



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- Changes in the security environment and Sweden's related policy changes adopted in the early 2000s made large national-level planning and organization unnecessary. This led to a decentralization of Sweden's crisis preparedness system.
- Covid-19 is the latest reminder of some of the shortcomings in Sweden's crisis preparedness. Previous warning signs were the 2004 tsunami in Southeast Asia, and the forest fires in 2014 and 2018.
- A major effort is currently underway in Sweden to build a streamlined system to respond to the broad scope of vulnerabilities and threats. A functioning crisis preparedness system is not only important in itself, but also as a contribution to Sweden's total defence efforts. Rebuilding the system, however, will be slow and costly.
- Sweden's crisis preparedness system is characterized by a complex authority landscape and discrepancies between sectors and regions.
- While the Swedish constitution does not allow for exceptions in crises, and ministerial governance is forbidden, the Covid-19 situation may spark a discussion about the need for changes in the legal framework.



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ISBN 978-951-769-637-1

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Cover photo: Thomas Henrikson/MSB

The publication is part of FIIA's Finnish foreign policy project partly funded by the National Emergency Supply Agency.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, crisis preparedness has become increasingly important in Sweden. The very dramatic shifts in Sweden's total defence and crisis preparedness approach have been shaped by the national threat assessments conducted every few years. For decades, the primary emphasis was on war and the threat of war, as well as on national-level coordination and the comprehensive involvement of the whole society. In the decades after the end of the Cold War, Sweden changed from one of the most crisis-prepared countries in Europe to a country that was said to be able to manage for just one week if it were to be attacked.¹ Currently, a major effort is being made to rebuild Sweden's total defence, civil defence and crisis preparedness systems to better respond to the vulnerabilities in today's security environment.

This Briefing Paper investigates the current status of Swedish crisis preparedness, its potential future trajectories, as well as challenges for implementation. The paper starts by outlining the broad historical developments that came to influence Sweden's preparedness planning, and continues with a discussion about the definitional dilemmas surrounding the rebuilding of the system. It will then focus on the Swedish governance system, both through the concrete administrative organization and the political culture. The last section in the paper will present some of the major challenges through the lens of security of supply, and especially regarding aspects around Sweden's Covid-19 response.

FROM TOTAL DEFENCE TO GREY ZONE THREATS

In the 1950s, Sweden had the world's fourth largest air force and an extensive stockpiling system for food items, oil products and cash. Lessons learned from both world wars had shown that war affects the whole society and consequently a comprehensive approach towards defence and crisis preparedness was needed. This led to the development of Sweden's total defence

thinking, which was built on both military and civilian preparedness. The Swedish security policy doctrine rested on the concept of "non-alignment in peacetime, neutrality in war".

Officially, Sweden's approach remained somewhat the same until the end of the Cold War. Due to the absence of a threat of direct military aggression against Sweden after this watershed, the risk of an armed attack was eventually deemed unlikely in the foreseeable future (in the next 10 years). As a result of the defence policy bills between 1999–2001 and 2004, Sweden's territorial defence planning was replaced with capabilities for expeditionary missions. Among other developments, there were drastic reductions in the defence budget, while compulsory military service, in place since 1901, became voluntary in 2010. The policy bills also led to phasing out emergency stockpiling for food items, medicine and oil among other things in 2004, which was done by selling, donating or destroying what was in stock. For example, 7.3 million protective masks were burned and the number of field hospitals was reduced from around fifty to two. Facilities were sold, demolished or sealed off. Sweden's neutrality doctrine also gradually developed from neutrality into a solidarity-based approach whereby Sweden is defended together with others – an approach enabled by Sweden's NATO partnership and EU membership.

While planning for war was ruled out, Sweden prioritized readiness for civil emergencies, including disasters and accidents. The security shift also meant that extensive national-level planning and organization was no longer required, and more responsibility could be given to regional and local actors.

The next watershed that drastically shifted Sweden's defence planning and threat assessment was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In particular, Russia's simulated attacks against Sweden in 2013, military intervention in Ukraine since 2014, and involvement in the Syrian civil war since 2015 were repeatedly pointed to as signs of increased Russian assertiveness, which significantly affected the security environment in Europe and Sweden's neighbourhood. This not only reinstated the traditional military threat in Swedish security assessments, but also highlighted grey zone situations and hybrid interference as well

¹ Statement by Supreme Commander of the Swedish Armed Forces Sverker Göransson in an interview with *Svenska Dagbladet* in 2012. See *Försvar med tidsgräns*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, 30.12.2012. <https://www.svd.se/forsvar-med-tidsgrans>.

Total defence	All activities required to prepare Sweden for war. Total defence consists of military and civil defence.
Military defence	The main actor is the Swedish Armed Forces, supported by other relevant authorities.
Civil defence	The whole society's resilience in the event of war or threat of war. Civil defence consists of various activities and actors, not a single organization. Supports military defence.
Crisis preparedness	Society's ability to prevent, resist and handle a crisis. Applies in peacetime. Consists of various activities and actors, not a single organization.
Civil preparedness	Term suggested by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency MSB, including both civil defence and crisis preparedness.

Figure 1. Definitions

as the need for comprehensive societal preparations. Sweden reactivated compulsory military service (albeit in a very limited way), increased military spending and raised awareness, for example by sending leaflets to every household about what to do in the event of a crisis or war. The drastic changes in Sweden's preparedness have thus been interlinked with its assessments of the security environment.

CRISIS, CIVIL OR MILITARY PREPAREDNESS

With the various vulnerabilities and insecurities in mind, Sweden currently has a very broad definition of security. Besides incorporating war and armed attacks, the definition includes, but is not limited to, information warfare, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, disruptions in information flows, financial crises, pandemics, threats against human rights and democracy, and climate change.² Despite the solidarity policy and Sweden's high levels of international cooperation, the starting point is that it will take a while for any decisions to be made or international support or help to arrive for Sweden, during which time the country has to be able to endure on its own. This puts a lot of emphasis on its own capacity.

Currently, there is a major effort underway in Sweden to build a streamlined system to respond to the broad scope of vulnerabilities that the various threats pose. The term societal disruptions has been used as a comprehensive definition to include anything from accidents to crises to war. It has been argued that since a broad concept better incorporates the variety of categories, it also improves the possibilities for coordinating between various sectors and actors that are responsible for responding to disruptions in society,

whether civilian or military. While civil defence looks more into supporting the military and its preparations for war or a war-like situation, aspects of crisis preparedness apply in peacetime.

The baseline for a streamlined system is to safeguard vital societal activities, which means the ability to "prevent, handle and recover from strains on the activities and functions that are important for the life and health of the population, functioning of society and fundamental values".³ These values include issues such as safeguarding democracy, the rule of law and fundamental human rights and freedoms, while critical functions include, for example, a functioning health-care system, information and communication systems, water and energy supply, and flow of goods and services. The baseline is that a disruption in or cessation of these activities could lead to a crisis in society, or that the activity is vital for managing an already existing crisis and its consequences. This includes the goals for military and civil defence and crisis preparedness.

There is currently no existing framework for civil defence after it was separated from military defence and eventually eliminated in early 2000. It has been argued that it should instead build on the existing systems and principles driving crisis preparedness. The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency MSB (*Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap*) has repeatedly noted that the planning for civil defence and crisis preparedness should go hand in hand, and has suggested that they should be defined under the common concept of *civil preparedness*. Others have argued that the current crisis preparedness structure is not applicable to the requirements that the current security environment imposes on society, and have warned about the risk of a competition for resources in general.⁴ Hence,

2 See Anderson and Jeppson 2018; Resilience report 2017 <https://www.regeringen.se/4b02db/globalassets/regeringen/dokument/forsvarsdepartementet/forsvarsberedningen/ds-2017-66-motstandskraft-inriktningen-av-totalforsvaret-och-utformningen-av-det-civila-forsvaret-2021-20252.pdf>.

3 Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap (2018). Systematiskt arbete med skydd av samhällsviktig verksamhet. <https://rib.msb.se/filer/pdf/27978.pdf>.

4 See, for example, Anderson and Jeppson (2018), Ett trovärdigt totalförsvär; Johansson et al. (2017). Det civila försvarets utgångspunkt i krisberedskapen: En övergripande analys av förutsättningar och utmaningar, Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut.

although the broader scope for the goals of securing Swedish society is clear, the more specific viewpoints, definitions or goals for crisis or civil preparedness are not clear at this point in time.

BALANCING BETWEEN POLITICAL CUSTOMS AND SPEED OF ACTION

The foundation for Swedish crisis preparedness lies in regular administrative structures. At the national level, the government and parliament are responsible for a strategic and comprehensive crisis response. The emphasis in the administrative structure is on the requirement for the government to apply collective decision-making, and the government gets its mandate from the parliament. Ministerial governance is forbidden.

While Sweden does not have a specific legal framework for emergencies, it has a legal framework when it comes to higher levels of alert and war. The emphasis is on total defence and measures that prepare Sweden for war. The overall goal in Sweden has been to form a judicial framework for times of peace that is equally applicable for war and crisis situations. Concepts like state of emergency and exceptions in the law have not been part of the political culture in Sweden, and can only be used in war but not in peacetime emergencies. Exceptions have generally been perceived as going against the rule of law principles guiding the Swedish legal framework.

The principle of not imposing a state of emergency was challenged for the first time due to Covid-19, when the Swedish government proposed transferring some of the parliament's decision-making authority to the government in order to speed up decision-making. This was seen by some as a significant shift away from the previous emphasis in Sweden on not intervening in the very strict principles of limited ministerial power and the rule of law. Here, the timing of the proposal was also discussed as Sweden was in a crisis, whereas the laws or changes to them ought to be formed in regular circumstances as a rule.

While some have argued that the parliament proved itself able to act with sufficient speed, others have noted that Sweden may face a situation in the future where decisions need to be taken in a matter of hours, if not minutes. The discussion around the need to make changes to the constitution has also arisen regarding grey zone threats and vulnerabilities, which challenge

the traditional division between peace and war. The Covid-19 situation may thus spark a discussion about whether there is a need to make any changes to the Swedish constitution regarding crises. The question will be whether speedy decision-making outweighs the emphasis on democracy and human rights.

A COMPLEX AUTHORITY GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

Sweden is characterized by a pluralistic authority landscape and categorized into three different administrative levels: national, regional and local. At the national level, the measures by the government and parliament are supported by other relevant central authorities.⁵ At the regional level, county councils function as a link between the local and national levels.

In peacetime emergencies, the government oversees all state authorities and can issue them with instructions, directives or statements, but it cannot infringe on the authorities' responsibilities when it comes to the administration and application of the law. It is important to note that it is for these reasons that the independent authorities, the MSB, the Health Agency of Sweden (*Folkhälsomyndigheten*) and the National Board of Health and Welfare (*Socialstyrelsen*) – not the government – have been present at the press conferences concerning Covid-19.

The authority landscape in Sweden is complex, particularly when viewed through a lens that spans a few decades. As mentioned earlier, the political decisions that were made based on the threat assessment around the turn of the millennium decentralized the responsibility for crisis preparedness. Changes in policies in Sweden have, perhaps unintentionally, been characterized by mergers, and the establishment and closure of authorities and organizations. The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency MSB was itself established in 2009, after three organizations were shut down, which themselves had been merged earlier through other organizations.

The report analyzing the response to the 2004 tsunami, where Sweden was one of the worst affected countries outside Asia, noted a major shortcoming in

⁵ Their responsibilities and tasks have been set in the Regulation (2015:1052) about crisis preparedness and actions by the authorities responsible in the case of higher preparedness (Förordning (2015:1052) om krisberedskap och bevakningsansvariga myndigheters åtgärder vid höjd beredskap) https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/forordning-20151052-om-krisberedskap-och_sfs-2015-1052.

Responsibility	Those in charge in regular circumstances are also responsible in times of crisis and war.
Subsidiarity	The crisis will be managed at the lowest organizational level.
Similarity	The measures should be similar whether in peace, crisis or war.

Figure 2. Principles for crisis preparedness

the organization of crisis management.⁶ The creation of the MSB was seen as one of the measures to improve coordination and communication. In practice, however, the issue of resources has been debated. Some argue that the MSB has never received sufficient resources to fulfil its duties despite promises to increase funding, which in general include different viewpoints. For example, the MSB estimated that more than twice the amount estimated in the Swedish Defence Commission 2017 Resilience report would be needed to fulfil all civil defence and crisis preparedness responsibilities.⁷ Others say that with 1,000 employees, the MSB's challenges actually boil down to issues around coordination and organizational culture. In comparison, the Finnish counterpart to the MSB, the National Emergency Supply Agency (NESA), has around 50 and Norway's Directorate for Civil Protection (DSB) around 700 employees.

Furthermore, the decentralization of crisis preparation responsibilities has also made the structures to address crises more complex. Although the MSB functions at a national level, its tasks are currently mainly related to coordination between various actors and it has responsibility for "issues concerning civil protection, public safety, emergency management and civil defence *as long as no other authority has responsibility*".⁸ Since Swedish crisis preparedness builds on the principles of responsibility, subsidiarity and similarity (See Figure 2), the crisis preparedness system is decentralized and the response should begin at the lowest level, which can pose a challenge in the case of a more serious and broad crisis. During the forest fires in 2014 and 2018, some of the shortcomings boiled down to a lack of situational awareness and uncertainties within the crisis preparedness system, particularly at the national level. During the 2018 forest fires,

although better prepared, Sweden faced difficulties in tackling the unprecedented crisis. The country utilized the international links, activated the EU's Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) and received assistance from a number of countries. Subsequent reports suggested increasing the MSB's responsibilities and support for municipalities, but these recommendations have not yet been implemented.⁹

As the main responsibility lies with the authorities, and no one authority has comprehensive responsibility for all sectors at the national level, it means that there are discrepancies between various sectors as well as regions. The Swedish Defence Commission already noted the need for systems and structures that stretch across sectors in its 2007 report. While the elimination of national-level systems happened almost overnight, rebuilding them will be a slow and costly process. In combination with the lack of centralized decision-making power for one actor and the multitude of actors operating in various fields within crisis preparedness, rapid changes may be even harder. No authority is eager to give up aspects of its responsibilities or mandate to another organization and see its funding decrease.

SECURITY OF SUPPLY – A CASE IN POINT

As with other crisis preparedness functions, security of supply has been closely interlinked to the threat assessments conducted throughout the years. Maintaining an extensive system was seen as costly and unnecessary when an invasion of Sweden was deemed unlikely, but has again become an important topic in the planning for more comprehensive and potentially longer-term disruptions. Within the political debate, Sweden has been criticized for being very late in its awakening, and notwithstanding this and some steps forward, there are still major lags between the

6 Regeringskansliet (2005). Sverige och tsunamin – granskning och förslag. <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredning-ar/2005/12/sou-2005104/>.

7 The Resilience report sets SEK 400 million (37 million euros) annually for the period 2021–2025, but the MSB estimated the need at SEK 900 million (84 million euros). See MSB (2020). Så skapar vi motståndskraft: <https://www.msb.se/contentassets/468ce28c38f44204820a60fd0d5783d7/sa-skapar-vi-motstandskraft.pdf>.

8 Lagen.nu (2008). Förordning (2008:1002) med instruktion för Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap <https://lagen.nu/2008:1002#P1>.

9 Swedish Government (2015). Utredning Skogsbranden i Västmanlands län – lärdomar för framtiden <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/kommitte-direktiv/2014/08/dir.-2014116/> & Regeringskansliet (2019). Skogsbränderna sommaren 2018. <https://www.regeringen.se/4906d2/contentassets/8a43cbc3286c4eb39be8b347ce78da16/skogsbranderna-sommaren-2018-sou-2019-7.pdf>.



Civil medical personnel was trained to use the military equipment. Source: The Swedish Armed Forces/ Jonas Helmersson.

shortcomings noted in reports and concrete measures to tackle them.

There is currently neither an exact definition of nor a goal for security of supply in Sweden, making planning efforts more difficult. For example, the Swedish Board of Agriculture, which had been in charge of security of supply at the national level until early 2000, has argued that the definition “capability of supply” would be more applicable to the realities of stockpiling today. The report issued by the Swedish National Audit Office ties the definition of security of supply to the broader security of society as:

“the ability in war and crises to: 1) provide the population with the supply and services needed for its existence, and 2) provide vital societal activities with the supply and services they need for their functioning.”¹⁰

Most recently, the debate around security of supply arose regarding medical equipment during Covid-19. There is no central coordination of security of supply within healthcare, where the responsibility is instead divided between 21 regions. This means that

each region has its own model. The lack of a cohesive national plan and the significantly different systems between the regions were noted as some of the problems in the political debate regarding access to medical equipment. In addition to this, the decision taken in 2009 to end the monopoly of Apotek AB was seen as a contributing factor to a lower security of supply. Apotek AB was previously responsible for the supply of medicine throughout the whole country, but once the framework changed no one actor took over the national responsibility of supply or coordination.

Decentralization has led to the fact that nobody has responsibility for the overall security of supply preparations that the state itself or state monopolies previously had. In Sweden too, many sectors and functions have been increasingly privatized, which also adds to the multitude of actors important for crisis preparedness and security of supply. The involvement of the private sector in these efforts also arises questions about competition neutrality and resources. Some reports have referred to using the systems in Finland, Norway and Switzerland as inspiration: They are all small countries like Sweden with different solutions for private-public partnership and funding mechanisms. Furthermore, the broadly used “just-in-time” logistics means that large storage facilities are not required, since the goal is to have an optimized system

¹⁰ Riksrevisionen (2018). Livsmedels- och läkemedelsförsörjning – samhällets säkerhet och viktiga samhällsfunktioner <https://www.riksrevisionen.se/rapporter/granskningsrapporter/2018/livsmedels-och-lakemedelsforsorjning--samhallets-sakerhet-och-viktiga-samhallsfunktioner-.html>.

to avoid major stocks. For example, the Federation of Swedish Farmers has argued that this system is one of the key factors making total defence planning for security of supply challenging for those involved in primary production. Implementing a model between the public and private sectors is, however, crucial if Sweden wants to secure a better security of supply.

Like many other small countries, Sweden faces the challenges of not having an extensive industrial base as well as not being prioritized as a market in the global competition, reflecting the vulnerabilities today. Unlike Sweden, Finland has factored these vulnerabilities into its own preparedness capacity. For example, Finland imports 80% of its medicine, but has a legal framework for compulsory stockpiling and stockpiles around 1,400 different medicines to cover usage for 3–12 months. On the one hand, Sweden's international linkages have led to increased dependency on other actors as its assessment has been that integration into the EU's common markets for example reduces the need for national capacity. However, in early April, Sweden's reliance on its trading partners witnessed a major change, as its close trading partners France and Germany cancelled all of their exportation of specific goods needed for the treatment and prevention of Covid-19 and produced equipment for domestic use instead. Sweden was not prepared for a situation where EU states would actually stall their exports. This has raised questions not only about the reliability of the EU's internal solidarity, but particularly about the issue that Sweden's national capacity is dependent on external actors and the problematic assumption that these links will continue as business as usual if Sweden is in a crisis.

On the other hand, Sweden's EU membership and international cooperation have set minimum criteria to meet in certain sectors. For example, Sweden is obliged by its membership in the International Energy Program (IEP) to meet specific minimum requirements for energy stockpiling. Similar requirements for crude oil or petroleum products are also outlined in the EU Directive on stockpiling obligations. Other examples are the European Programme for Critical Infrastructure Protection (EPCIP) and the EU's law on civil protection from 2014. These naturally only set minimum requirements, and if Sweden wants to be well prepared for the range of vulnerabilities that the threat assessments outline, it will require more efforts in other sectors – particularly if the starting point is that Sweden ought to manage by itself in the event of a major disruption.

CONCLUSION

While the elimination of Sweden's comprehensive national focus happened very rapidly, rebuilding its capacity and improving coordination will be a time-consuming process. A functioning crisis preparedness system is not only important in itself, but also as a contributing factor to Sweden's total defence efforts. The broader picture for aligning military and civil defence, as well as civil defence and crisis preparedness, is important as they all build on the common goal of mitigating the impact of societal disruptions and ensuring the continuation of vital societal functions. Due to the significantly different operational and security environment today, however, the structures that were in place before are no longer applicable.

This is evident through the decreasing responsibility of the state or state-owned monopolies and the increasing number of actors that now need to be involved, whether in total defence or crisis preparedness planning. While military defence is organized by the armed forces, the civil side consists of a number of functions and a wide array of actors, ranging from private companies and municipalities to central authorities and the government. This will continue to prove challenging for coordinating efforts, formulating definitions, responsibilities, concrete goals and funding needs among other things.

There have been warning signs and awareness in Sweden about the insufficiency of the current crisis preparedness system, particularly when it comes to large-scale crises. The decentralized characteristics of the Swedish system in the face of a national threat have caused concrete problems. What the unprecedented Covid-19 situation has served to do is highlight some of the shortcomings in the system and put emphasis on the need for better national preparedness despite Sweden's international links. The issue of security of supply, where Sweden has relied on external actors and a functioning flow of goods to secure its own ability to safeguard its citizens has proved problematic. Here, Sweden can learn from other small countries that face similar vulnerabilities and challenges with regard to how to develop the public-private partnership for example. The pressure of Covid-19 may add to the urgency and political will to take drastic and fast measures to prepare for the next possible nationwide crisis. Sweden has made swift decisions before and may do so again.