

Non-allied states in a changing Europe: Sweden and its bilateral relationship with Finland in a new security context

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Swedish security policy has experienced dramatic developments in recent decades. With the end of the Cold War, Swedish security policy could not identify any military threat to the country's security, and so the armed forces were dramatically reduced. What remained of Swedish defence shifted the focus to international peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations. At this point it was said that Swedish security started in Afghanistan; the doctrine of Swedish security policy was accordingly referred to as the 'Afghanistan doctrine'. But in 2008 the Swedish Parliamentary Defence Commission (*Försvarsberedningen*) presented a report which, for the first time in many years, recognized what might become a new security context. The Defence Commission argued that the litmus test of Russia's choice of future path would be how it came to behave toward former members of the Soviet Union over the coming years (Försvarsberedningen 2007: 36). Accordingly, many Swedish politicians and commentators saw the Russian–Georgian war later that same year as proof of a more assertive Russia (see Brommesson 2015). After 2008, tension levels in Sweden's neighbourhood have risen – including what the Swedish Armed Forces have deemed to be violation of Swedish territorial waters by a foreign power, confrontational behaviour in the airspace over the Baltic Sea and reports of heightened levels of espionage in Sweden. Against this background, the Swedish security policy has gradually refocused and has once again defined the defence of Swedish territory as its first priority. Military spending has increased, various types of bilateral and multilateral cooperation within the defence area have gained momentum and there is now lively discussion on what Sweden's future security policy should look like.

In this debate one central issue concerns the character of Sweden's future security policy cooperation. In particular, two forms of cooperation have featured in discussions in the past decade: Sweden's extensive cooperation with NATO, which now includes almost all aspects of NATO membership except the core of such membership: the mutual defence assurances under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty; and Sweden's equally extensive bilateral cooperation with Fin-

land. This Policy Brief discusses these two forms of security policy cooperation as points of departure for alternative paths for Swedish security policy. In particular I focus on the idea of the bilateral relationship between the two post-neutral Nordic states, Sweden and Finland, as a potential solution to cut the Gordian knot of the Swedish security dilemma. First let us examine the historical context.

Sweden's security dilemma during the Cold War

To understand Sweden's strategic security policy choices it is important to be aware of how Sweden has approached these issues historically, as there seem to be very strong path dependencies involved here. Sweden has, at least in a formal sense, been militarily non-allied for more than two hundred years. It is no exaggeration to say that Sweden's policy remaining non-allied has long been an integral element in the country's foreign policy identity. During the Cold War, when Sweden faced a new security situation, situated between two opposing blocs, the policy of neutrality provided a clear path – after all, that same policy had helped Sweden to stay outside the Second World War. However, this did not come without a moral cost. Sweden found it would have to adjust to and accommodate to the different powers of Europe, just as it had done during the 19th century on various occasions. All the same, the policy of neutrality enjoyed widespread acceptance.

When Sweden faced a new security situation after the end of the Second World War, and after negotiations on a Scandinavian defence union had collapsed, the policy of neutrality was the alternative closest at hand. But again it was not a policy without complications. When Sweden had to choose between NATO membership and a policy of neutrality, both options came at a cost. The cost of membership in NATO was the possibility of adding to security tensions in Northern Europe, as Sweden would no longer be able to act as a sort of buffer zone between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The cost of opting for a policy of neutrality was, on the other hand, the potential difficulty of defending Swedish territory since Sweden, a rather small country, would have to rely on its own military

forces (Agrell 2016). With hindsight, we now know that Sweden balanced this potential difficulty of defending itself with behind-the-scenes cooperation with NATO, including what were perceived as at least informal security guarantees. Of course, this hidden alliance, or ‘lifeline’ as it has been called, threatened the credibility of Sweden’s policy of neutrality – but that was a risk that Swedish governments during the Cold War were willing to take (Holmström 2011; Dalsjö 2006).

The Europeanization of Swedish security policy

In 1995, when both Sweden and Finland joined the EU, Sweden no longer faced the same security dilemma, at least not for the foreseeable future. The step of joining the EU had become possible due to the dramatic changes in the European security order with the end of the Cold War. Until then, both Finland and Sweden had stayed outside the EU partly because of the general feeling that membership in a political union like the EU would be difficult to combine with the credibility of the kind of security policy chosen by the two countries: that of non-alignment. Since Sweden was otherwise widely regarded as a country belonging to the West, remaining outside the EU was a way of sending a signal eastward that the policy of neutrality was something Sweden took seriously.

But when the need for neutrality had disappeared with the end of the Cold War, both Finland and Sweden could join the European integration project – as they did, with considerable enthusiasm, especially regarding the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). When the EU started to develop military tools as part of its crisis-management capacity, Finland and Sweden supported this effort. As this closer cooperation within the EU was developing, both countries also developed closer bonds with NATO in order to be part of its crisis-management capacity, while remaining non-members. Both Sweden and Finland could at that point be described as ‘post-neutrals’ – members of a political union, but not within a military alliance (Möller and Bjereld 2010).

One paradox of the closer cooperation within the EU was that it resulted in not only European structures but Nordic structures as well. In order to be able to contribute to the new crisis management tools, the Nordic countries had to cooperate, since they were too small on their own. They set up battle groups together within the EU, conducted exercises and cooperated on equipment procurement (Rieker 2004). European cooperation had suddenly resulted in closer Nordic cooperation, with the creation of NORDEF and various bilateral cooperation arrangements (Brommesson 2015; Doeser et al. 2012).

The Nordic and the Finnish-Swedish defence cooperation

The closer Nordic cooperation – Finnish–Swedish in particular – came to develop rapidly over the coming years. When the security-policy climate in Northern Europe started to turn chillier, the old security guarantees once again became important to NATO members. At the same time the EU began losing momentum – hardly surprising, as the structures developed within the EU are structures created for a different kind of crisis management than the challenges re-emerging in Northern Europe today. For Finland and Sweden, this meant that they once again found themselves in a dilemma (see Agrell 2016), just as they had done during the Cold War: on one hand, the option of joining a military alliance (NATO) with the potential confrontation this

could spark in the immediate neighbourhood, or to remain non-allied based on national defence, with the risk of military power insufficient for actual defence. This risk is probably much higher today, as the Swedish defence is arguably weaker now compared to the situation during the Cold War.

However, there is one important difference from the situation during the Cold War: bilateral cooperation has provided Sweden and Finland with a structure for ever-closer cooperation, so that neither of the two must tackle this dilemma alone. There is now a third option, a third way that can augment the military capacities of the two countries, without creating obvious military confrontation. At least in theory this sounds very much like an Alexandrian solution that could slice through the Gordian Knot of the security dilemma so familiar to both countries since the Cold War. It is too early to say just how credible this third option is and how deep Swedish–Finnish solidarity goes beyond a peacetime setting, but this is evidently an option that is on the table, and should therefore be open to debate. Here let me make it clear: Swedish–Finnish cooperation is not an alternative to NATO membership in the sense of providing Sweden, or Finland, with the same security guarantees as regular membership in the alliance. What needs to be discussed is whether such bilateral cooperation can offer a better trade-off between sufficient security measures and geopolitical concerns, compared to NATO membership.

There are indeed important rational arguments for the closer cooperation between Finland and Sweden. As non-allied countries, or rather post-neutrals (see Möller and Bjereld 2010), located in the same region, the two countries face similar challenges. They also have a well-developed tradition of cooperation, as well as many historical connections that form the basis for fruitful cooperation and a strong shared identity. This basis for cooperation became evident in early 2016, when Sweden’s Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström, delivered the annual foreign policy declaration of the Swedish Government to the Parliament. This declaration included a heavy emphasis on how Sweden seeks security together with others: NATO, the EU, and the UN, or within the Nordic sphere. But mention was made of one, and one only, bilateral relationship with regard to Swedish security policy: the relationship with Finland. The importance of Swedish–Finnish cooperation became clear also in 2015 when the two countries reached an agreement on even-deeper defence cooperation. Here it was evident that this bilateral cooperation extends beyond ceremonies and symbolic gestures, to include highly operative elements as well (Wallström 2016). In an article by Ministers of Defence Hultqvist and Haglund (2015) such elements would include:

- preparations for a joint Swedish–Finnish Naval Task Force in the Baltic Sea (full operative capacity by 2023)
- use of each other’s naval bases
- joint anti-submarine exercises
- increased inter-operability between the air forces in order to prepare for joint operations
- the use of the other country’s air force bases
- joint combat control
- the development of a concept for deploying a joint army force of the size of a brigade (ready by 2020).

These are all highly operative measures aimed at enabling the two non-allied countries to support each other's defences in a time of new and heightened security challenges. Swedish–Finnish cooperation has today reached a level that, judged by any established measure, must be seen as exceptional for non-allied countries. The Finnish–Swedish bilateral relationship stands out in Sweden's foreign and security policy; and the conditions for further Finnish–Swedish cooperation seem highly favourable. From a Swedish point of view, it could be added that cooperation with the Nordic neighbours enjoys very strong support among the Swedish population, and the bilateral relationship with Finland is no exception to this rule.

NATO membership - an alternative on the rise?

Despite the increasing intensity of Swedish–Finnish defence cooperation – and also despite the reluctance of the Swedish government to discuss NATO membership – there seems to be increasing momentum for joining the alliance, to judge from the debate in Sweden. All of four former coalition partners of the centre-right government (2006–2014) led by Fredrik Reinfeldt are now in favour of membership. Moreover public opinion poll indicates that a growing share of the populace would support membership, in a few polls, the share of those in favour of joining NATO has even exceeded the share who are opposed (Bjereld et al. 2016). The big question is whether Swedish–Finnish cooperation can constitute an independent third option in Swedish security policy, or is merely a stepping-stone towards future NATO membership.

In 2015 the Swedish government, together with three of the opposition parties – the liberal-conservative Moderates (Moderaterna), the liberal agrarian Centre Party (Centerpartiet) and the Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna) reached a defence agreement resulting in increased defence spending for the coming years. One element in this agreement was that an independent report on Swedish cooperation with other countries and organizations within the field of security policy should be prepared (SOU 2016: 57). This report, written by Krister Bringéus, Swedish Ambassador for the Arctic, was presented on 9 September 2016, and has already had an impact on the Swedish security policy debate. Even if the report does not clearly recommend joining NATO – the membership issue is said to be a political question outside the scope of a public report – it still points out several advantages with membership, as well as some disadvantages. The general impression when the report was presented seemed to be that advantages were seen as outweighing the disadvantages, even if the report itself did not state such a conclusion (see *Sveriges Radio*, 9 September 2016). One observation supporting this conclusion was the enthusiasm with which the pro-NATO opposition welcomed the report (*Sveriges Television*, 9 September 2016).

The very day the report was published, Foreign Minister Margot Wallström and the Minister of Defence, Peter Hultqvist, published an article in *Dagens Nyheter* emphasising that Swedish security policy remains unchanged (Wallström and Hultqvist, 9 September 2016). It is not unreasonable to assume that they felt the need to state this again because of the character of the report. In this article they noted that Swedish security policy is based on three pillars:

- military non-alignment
- an upgrading of Swedish military capacity
- dependence on international cooperation.

With this third point, the ministers emphasized the EU as 'the most important foreign and security policy platform for Sweden'. Sweden's bilateral relationship with Finland, including 'operative planning for situations beyond peacetime conditions', was also underlined as an important way of taking responsibility for security.

The article by Wallström and Hultqvist also helps to explain the motives behind Sweden's policy as a militarily non-allied country. These motives are actually rather traditional. According to their article:

- [To be] non-allied reflects an essentially defensive profile of Sweden in international affairs.
- NATO membership would not contribute to the easing of tensions in Northern Europe.
- A change in Swedish security policy would not contribute to predictability and stability, and would be regarded as a dramatic shift with 'a direct effect on the security political situation in our part of Europe'.

There is also a less official argument, and it concerns Finland. If Sweden joins NATO but Finland does not, that would leave Finland in a vulnerable situation. Here, however, we should bear in mind that the Swedish government – also the most recent report discussed above – has realized that Finland does not wish to be part of the Swedish NATO debate, as that could make Finland a scapegoat that was obstructing Sweden from joining NATO. Hence, this argument has not figured in the official discussion.

Turning from the arguments against membership to the pro-NATO side, we can first note that the opposition is now calling for an open debate on NATO membership, like the open door policy of Finland. However, while the Finnish open door policy is a policy of keeping the option of NATO membership open without deciding to join, the Swedish pro-NATO opposition makes no secret of the fact that they hold that open debate ought to result in membership. In their view, full membership in NATO would strengthen Swedish security and make security policy more predictable. The four former coalition partners, now in favour of NATO membership, apparently feel encouraged by the recent report. It therefore seems tempting to conclude that Sweden would apply for NATO membership if these four parties should form a new government after the elections in 2018 (or even earlier if a majority in parliament turns against the current government).

However, that would be jumping to conclusions. There are several important reasons why a centre-right government would find it hard to apply for membership. First, the leading opposition party, the Moderates, has made it clear that such an important step would require a broad majority that included the Social Democrats – who are highly unlikely to change their policy on NATO membership. It would thus be hard to achieve such a broad majority in parliament. Second, the general assumption is that the issue of joining NATO would

require a referendum. Since public opinion on NATO membership has long been in favour of Sweden remaining outside the alliance (but see above for a discussion on recent exceptions to this rule) it is doubtful that a referendum would now show public support for joining. Third, even if the four centre-right parties should go in for membership, ignoring the demands for broad majority support in parliament and public support in a referendum, it would still be difficult for a potential centre-right government to win the backing of even a small majority in parliament. Since the four parties are not very likely to form a majority government, they would need the support of other party/parties. And since all other parties, including the nationalist-oriented Sweden Democrats, are opposed to NATO membership, it is hard to see how this could be accomplished.

Conclusions: Sweden at a crossroads

We have seen that Sweden is now approaching a crossroads with regard to its security policy. The option of a strict policy of neutrality like that pursued throughout the Cold War years is not on the table. Today, Sweden 'seeks security together with others' (Wallström 2016). However, the crossroads metaphor entails two options on how Sweden should seek security together with others: either within NATO as full members, or within various bilateral and multilateral forms of cooperation, where Swedish–Finnish cooperation has a special role. Due to public opinion and the distribution of seats in parliament, the second alternative seems more likely for the foreseeable future. However, it should be kept in mind that Swedish security policy is developing rapidly now. Studying Swedish security policy is therefore very much a matter of trying to study a moving target. Caution is required when attempting to predict Swedish security policy for the future.

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