

Military non-alignment, political solidarity, and a retreat to territorial defence: how to understand the Swedish NATO-debate

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A multifaceted problem

The development of Sweden's security policy might from the outside seem as a bit of a mystery. Policy has in the last 25 years changed dramatically from the Cold War's neutrality policy. The fact that Sweden during the Cold War perceived neutrality policy as a necessity is generally acknowledged. Sweden saw its role as a buffer between NATO and the Warsaw pact, and in order to achieve national security pursued a neutrality policy. After the end of the Cold War the neutrality policy was transformed into a policy of military and political non-alignment in order to create a possibility of neutrality in war. However, contemporary Swedish security and defence policy includes military non-alignment in combination with political solidarity, and the politicians have stopped talking about neutrality.¹

From the outside, this means that the necessity of Swedish military non-alignment might not be perceived as that clear any more. However, the present Swedish government has presented a firm no to the suggestion that Sweden should apply for NATO-membership. At the same time, the strategic changes in Europe have meant that Swedish security and defence policy has shifted from the last 10 years' focus on international operations, and the idea to defend Sweden

abroad rather than at home, to a policy in which a retreat of the armed forces to Swedish territory is a focal point.²

This situation has created an intricate question of how Swedish military non-alignment, solidarity policy, and the retreat of the armed forces to defending Swedish territory can be combined, thereby setting the scene for the Swedish NATO-debate.

Behind the scenes of the solidarity policy: international cooperation

In the 20 years between Sweden becoming a member of the EU in 1995 and the last Swedish defence bill in 2015, Sweden has gone from a solitary actor in security and defence policy towards an actor pursuing a solidarity policy, and is currently embedded in a number of international security and defence co-operations (EU, Nordic, bilateral, and multi-lateral, including getting closer to NATO). Behind the solidarity policy there is thus a need for international cooperation.

The reasons for increased cooperation in security and defence have been several; however in the years after the end of the Cold War up until the 2000s, they have not primarily had the purpose of increasing the capability of defending Swedish territory. One reason to start cooperation security and defence was the idea that there was no direct threat to the Swedish territory, and that Swedish interests therefore

1 Westberg, Jacob (2015) *Svenska säkerhetsstrategier*. Lund: Studentlitteratur. Dalsjö, Robert (2015) "Från neutralitet till solidaritet: omgestaltningen av Sveriges säkerhetspolitik efter det kalla kriget" in Engelbrekt, Kjell & Arita Holmberg & Jan Ångström (ed.) (2015) *Svensk säkerhetspolitik i Europa och Världen*. Stockholm: Norstedts Juridik.

2 Britz, Malena & Jacob Westberg (2015) "Återtåget till närområdet" *Internasjonal Politikk* 03/2015.

were best defended abroad in international military operations.³ In order to participate in such operations, international cooperation has become necessary, and there has for example been an increased interest in cooperation in training and in equipment acquisition.

This brings us to a second factor driving increased cooperation in security and defence: the increased impact of austerity policies on defence policy.⁴ One rationale behind more cooperation has been decreased costs and increased efficiency in acquisition processes. This has included efforts to buy equipment together, and to push for international collaboration in the production of equipment. As was made clear by the Norwegian and Swedish supreme commanders in 2007 the unwillingness to increase funding of the Armed Forces has been seen as an important driver for Nordic cooperation.⁵ Reducing costs has also been an aspect of bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation with non-Nordic states. The fact that it is not possible to go back to the kind of territorial defence Sweden had during the Cold War because it would demand too high rises in the defence budget has been pointed out in the Swedish Bertelmann report (see below).⁶

When Swedish security was to be safeguarded through participation in international operations, which was stated in the parliamentary decision on defence in 2004, international cooperation was a given. The decision taken by the parliament on defence policy in 2009 confirmed the move from a territorial defence to an expeditionary defence. International operations were justified referring to the widening of the security concept and the more complex threat picture of transboundary threats, non-state threats, terrorism, organised crime, environmental catastrophes and pandemics⁷ – all of which require international cooperation in security and defence.

The retreat to territorial defence

A paradox here is that the decision on defence policy in 2009 coincided with a discussion of the need to retreat the Swedish armed forces as a consequence of the Russian military actions taken in Georgia in 2008. However, a more extensive debate on the future of the Swedish defence did not start until 2012 when the Swedish Supreme Commander in an interview stated that Sweden only could defend itself for 7 days (at the most) in the case of an armed attack. The discussion of the Swedish armed forces capacity to defend Swedish territory had been non-existent for a long time and therefore

the statement resulted in surprise on behalf of politicians and the general public.⁸

The decision on the Swedish defence taken by parliament in 2015 has a radically different outlook from the decisions from 2004 and onwards. It stated for example that the armed forces should be dimensioned in order to work in Sweden and its neighbourhood, and that those who have done their military service should be given a place in the war time organisation of the armed forces. This last example shows the dissatisfaction with the education and recruitment of soldiers since the universal conscription was abolished.

The emphasis on a retreat in the Swedish defence policy from 2015 means that planning for a total defence has become central again. The concept of total defence (perhaps most similar to the British idea of comprehensive defence) is not new; it was the main pillar of Swedish defence policy during the cold war. The parliamentary decision from 2015 emphasises that total defence includes all activities “needed to prepare Sweden for war” both military and civilian.⁹ The decision includes planning for the civilian parts of the defence and war placement of civilians. The re-activation of the total defence is in stark contrast to the decision on defence policy taken by the parliament in 2004. This decision meant that the total defence concept was not necessary any more. The government therefore decided that the civilian part of the total defence would cease to exist.¹⁰ An important difference between the Swedish conception of the total defence and the conception of total defence in Norway and Denmark has been that in the Swedish setting it was a wartime concept, which meant that none of the activities (civilian or military) planned for under this concept could take place in peacetime.¹¹ The Swedish conception of total defence meant that it was difficult for the Swedish bureaucracy to place increased EU cooperation in the area of civil protection.¹²

According to the official rhetoric of the Swedish government the problem of how Swedish military non-alignment, political solidarity, and defence of Swedish territory can be combined is not really a problem. Sweden does not have to apply for NATO membership in order to safeguard its territory, or to pursue a solidarity policy. However, there is a very lively debate in Sweden about NATO-membership, indicating that the government does not have full support in this assessment.

3 Swedish Government Fö prop 2004.

4 Valasek, Tomas (2011) *Surviving Austerity. The Case for a New Approach for EU Military Cooperation*. London: Centre for European Reform.

5 Britz, Malena (2012). ”Ett oväntat uppsving för nordiskt säkerhetspolitiskt samarbete” in Doeser, Fredrik & Magnus Petersson & Jacob Westberg (ed.) *Norden mellan stormakter och fredsförbund*. Stockholm: Santérus Academic Press.

6 Bertelman, Tomas (2014) *Försvarspolitiskt samarbete – effektivitet, solidaritet, suveränitet*. Rapport från Utredningen om Sveriges internationella försvarspolitiska samarbete (Fö 2013:b).

7 Swedish Government 2009: 27-33.

8 Britz, Malena & Jacob Westberg (2015) “Återtåget till närområdet” *Internasjonal Politikk* 03/2015.

9 Swedish Government (2015) *Försvarspolitisk inriktning – Sveriges försvar 2016–2020* (Prop. 2014/15: 109). p.2.

10 Swedish Government (2004) *Vårt framtida försvar* (Prop. 2004/5:5), p. 12, 37.

11 Britz, Malena. (2006) *Lost in Translation? EU's solidarity declaration in practice: A Nordic perspective on civil protection*. Acta B 37, Stockholm: Swedish National Defence College.

12 Bremberg, Niklas & Malena Britz (2009) “Uncovering the diverging institutional logics of EU civil protection” *Cooperation and Conflict*. No 3 September/October 2009. Britz, Malena (2010) “Från civilförsvar till (utrikes) politik?” i Engelbrekt, Kjell & Jan Ångström (red.) *Svensk säkerhetspolitik i Europa och Världen*. Stockholm: Nordstedts Juridik.

Differing Swedish positions on NATO-membership

The debate about Swedish NATO-membership was renewed first in 2012, then again in 2014 after the confirmed underwater activities that autumn and in the Bertelmann report.¹³ It was intensified in 2015 after the new parliamentary decision on defence. The current government stated already in their declaration of government that Sweden should remain military non-aligned and that a Swedish NATO membership would not be pursued. This position has been confirmed several times, and again as late as in April by the Swedish Minister of Defence Peter Hultqvist at a seminar about the Swedish host nation support agreement with NATO. In his speech Mr Hultqvist emphasised that this agreement should not be seen as part of any steps towards NATO membership or any general strategy to get closer to NATO, or become members through the back door. He stated that the agreement “is what it is” and nothing more.¹⁴

The opposition parties, and especially the Conservatives, Christian Democrats, and the Center Party have clarified their NATO-positive position, claiming that Sweden should join the organisation. This is also the case for the Swedish liberals, but for them this position is a traditional one. The Christian Democrats and the Center Party both changed their minds in the autumn of 2015. When in government, the Conservatives during their first term in office only stated that NATO-membership was not an issue. During their second term in office they initiated a new debate through the commission of a report on Swedish defence co-operations, the mentioned Bertelmann report, which concluded that Sweden should apply for NATO-membership. Some representatives in the opposition Alliance (a political cooperation between the Conservatives, the Liberals, the Christian Democrats and the Center Party) are pushing to make NATO-membership a question for the next general elections in 2018. This obviously would give new fire to the debate on Swedish NATO-membership (and maybe a clearer picture of what the general public wants), however, many developments are possible before that, both internationally and domestically.

What the Swedes think about a Swedish NATO-membership is not easily deciphered, but the debate has been fuelled by the results from an opinion poll by Gothenburg University carried out at the end of 2015 and presented in May 2016.¹⁵ The number of respondents in favour of membership 2015 was clearly higher than those opposing membership. The general trend shown is that over time more people think that Sweden should join NATO, but the movement is slow

and seems to be quite volatile. The number of respondents agreeing with the statement “Sweden should apply for membership in NATO” has increased from 15% in 1994 to 38% in 2015. However, the number of undecided to this statement was only reduced from 37% to 32% in the same time period. At the same time the number of respondents claiming that the proposition “Sweden should in peacetime be military non-aligned, with the intent to be neutral in war” was a good proposition, was 60%. These results are contradictory. Despite these contradictions, it seems quite clear that when Russia has been perceived to be acting in a threatening way, the opinion in favour of Swedish NATO-membership increases. An indication of this is that when an opinion poll by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency was carried out (they also carry out opinion polls every year) in 2014 just after the alarms of Russian submarines in the Swedish archipelago, 48% of the respondents stated that Sweden soon, or quite soon, should apply for membership in NATO. When the same questions were asked in 2012 only 30% were in favour and 47% were against applying for membership.¹⁶

NATO-membership has by some debaters been argued to be a solution to the question of how to retreat the Swedish armed forces to Swedish territory without going back to Cold War style solitary defence policy. The question, as it is often posed in the debate, is whether Sweden is more or less safe in NATO. One claim that a NATO-membership would make Sweden less safe refers to such a membership as a threat to Russia's identity as a great power. Such a (perceived) threat on behalf of Russia would make them more aggressive and increase a security dilemma in the Nordic-Baltic area.¹⁷ Other claims that NATO-membership not only is needed because of the security guarantees it would bring in the form of Article 5, but that it is necessary if Sweden is to have the capability to defend itself.¹⁸ The debate is very lively in 2016.¹⁹ It has been fuelled by an interview in the Swedish daily newspaper Dagens Nyheter with the Russian foreign minister Sergej Lavrov. In the interview he claimed that a Swedish NATO membership would mean that the Russian armed forces would take measures (which ones were not defined).

13 Bertelman, Tomas (2014) *Försvarspolitiskt samarbete – effektivitet, solidaritet, suveränitet*. Rapport från Utredningen om Sveriges internationella försvarspolitiska samarbete (Fö 2013:b).

14 Hultqvist, Peter. 15 April 2016, Speech at seminar about the Host Nation Support Agreement with NATO at the Swedish organisation Society and Defence (Folk och Försvar).

15 Berndtsson, Joakim & Ulf Bjereld & Karl Ydén "Stöd för Nato-medlemskap nu större än motståndet" Op Ed in Dagens Nyheter, 6 May 2016.

16 MSB (2015) *Opinioner 2014. Allmänhetens syn på samhällsskydd, beredskap, säkerhetspolitik och försvar*. [https://www.msb.se/RibData/Filer/pdf/27502.pdf]

17 Hagström, Linus & Lundborg, Tom "Natomedlemskap gör Sverige mindre säkert", [http://www.dn.se/debatt/natomedlemskap-gor-sverige-mindre-sakert/] ; Jonter, Thomas "Sverige, Nato och frågan om säkerhetsgarantier." [http://manskligsakerhet.se/2015/10/29/sverige-nato-och-fragan-om-sakerhetsgarantier/]

18 Enström, Karin & Wallmark, Hans. "Sverige måste göra sig redo för medlemskap". http://www.dn.se/debatt/repliker/sverige-maste-gora-sig-redo-for-medlemskap/ Tolgfors, Sten & Winnerstig, Mike. "Nato det ansvarsfulla vägvalet för Sverige". [http://www.svd.se/mest-ansvarsfullt-att-ga-med-i-nato]

19 A number of op-eds have been written on the topic, both in favour of membership and against membership.

Returning to the political conundrum

The challenge for the present Swedish government is to pursue the separation between political solidarity and a necessity to become a member of NATO at the same time as it changes the main focus of its defence policy and the activities of the armed forces from international operations to territorial defence. Even though the latest parliamentary decision on the Swedish defence policy has reactivated the idea of a total defence, it is not possible to go back and pursue a more solitary security and defence policy, as was done during the Cold War. However, the role of international cooperation for a military non-aligned state focusing on territorial defence might be less clear than it was when focus was on the armed forces participating in international operations. As mentioned above, one main driving force behind cooperation earlier was economy, but strengthening of capabilities increasingly seems to play an important role.²⁰ The cooperation with Finland is the one pursued the furthest, where the Swedish Defence Minister has stated that this co-operation is prepared to be carried out in “circumstances beyond peacetime”.²¹ It should be pointed out here that cooperation “beyond peacetime” only is possible with other non-NATO states, which is a fact that acts as an inhibitor of a more generally increased Nordic cooperation. Another example is the increased transatlantic cooperation with the US in the areas of exercises, equipment, research interoperability, and international operations. With regard

to NATO, Sweden participates in the Enhanced Opportunity Program. Increased cooperation is developed with the latest step being the Host Nation Support Agreement ratified by the Swedish parliament as late as in May 2016. In addition, the Swedish armed forces are, despite the ‘retreat’ still engaged in international operations, for example the UN mission in Mali and in several EU operations.

It thus seems that one way of balancing between military non-alignment, solidarity policy, and a retreat of the armed forces to Swedish territory is through increased emphasis on bi- and multi-lateral defence cooperation. This is a bit ironic given that the solidarity policy grew out of increased international cooperation in security and defence. And importantly, increasing such cooperation can obviously not be separated from political expectations, neither domestically nor internationally. The NATO-debate will continue.

20 Westberg, Jacob (2015) ”2000-talets säkerhetsstrategier” in *Svenska säkerhetsstrategier*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.

21 Hultqvist, Peter. 15 April 2016, Speech at seminar about the Host Nation Support Agreement with NATO at the Swedish organisation Society and Defence (Folk och Försvar).

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