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Winds of Change: Is Sweden ready to give up its neutrality?

WP 2017-02

Bielefeld University



Universität Bielefeld

St. Petersburg State University



**Centre for German and
European Studies (CGES)**



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This paper on transformation of Sweden's security policy is a contribution to the prospective Master's thesis "The prospects of Sweden's entry into NATO". The field research for this study was supported by the Centre for German and European Studies (CGES).

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Abstract. In recent decades, Sweden has redefined its basic security policy orientation from neutrality to military non-alignment. In response to migration crisis in Europe and increasing tensions between the EU and Russia caused by the Ukrainian crisis, Sweden is increasing military spending and deepening military cooperation with other countries in the Baltic region and NATO.

This study seeks to analyze the concepts of neutrality and non-alignment within Swedish security policy, existing threats to national security and demonstrate the benefits and drawbacks of full NATO membership. Alternative measures to increase the security of Sweden are also presented.

Key words: neutrality, non-alignment, Sweden, defense policy, security policy, threat, military cooperation, NATO

Introduction

Swedish defense policy has changed dramatically in recent decades. For more than 200 years, Sweden was recognized as a neutral state. Neutral status insured Sweden against the sufferings of the World Wars and involvement in the confrontation of the Blocks during the Cold War. However, once the Cold War ended and the security environment changed, Sweden was driven towards transformation of its security policy.

The article seeks to analyze Sweden's current security policy orientation by answering the following questions: What are the concepts of neutrality and non-alignment security policy, and are they still relevant? How can the security policy of Sweden be characterized in terms of these concepts? What are the options to develop the security policy of Sweden?

The aim of the paper is to provide an overview of Swedish security policy with a clear empirical policy focus.

The study is based on analysis of the documents on Swedish defense and security policy, official government statements and reports, but also on interviews with Swedish experts and representatives of civil society made by the author during an internship in Stockholm March-April 2017. The following main questions were asked:

- What was the cause of the intensification of the debate on Sweden's possible joining the NATO?
- How do you assess Sweden-Russia relations?
- Is Sweden a neutral state? Why?
- What is your opinion on the issue of accession of Sweden to NATO? Why?

Clarification questions were also asked.

This paper has more practical value, rather than theoretical, therefore the theoretical issues are not developed here. The results of the study could be useful both for policy-makers and for future analytical studies on Swedish security policy.

Lost in definitions

The problem of terms and their definitions is quite common in modern science. Many of the concepts may have different definitions. To avoid confusion in this study, the terms 'neutrality' and 'non alignment' must be defined and distinguished.

Neutrality is commonly understood as policies aimed at avoiding participation or assistance in a dispute or war between others. According to the dictionary definition, “neutrality is not aligned with or supporting any side or position in a controversy” (dictionary.com, 2017). All the neutral states are divided into two groups:

- Permanently neutral states, for instance, Switzerland and Austria;
- Non-permanently (temporarily, during the given wartime) neutral states.

Hague Conventions Respecting the Rights and Duties of Neutral Powers and Persons in Case of War on Land and in Naval War establish the following:

- The transit of the troops of the warring parties, food cargoes and military cargoes is forbidden
- Corps of combatants cannot be formed nor recruiting agencies opened on the territory of a neutral Power to assist the belligerents;
- It is forbidden to organize the station of wireless telegraphy or other means of communication with belligerent forces;
- It is forbidden to pass warships, ammunition, or any war material to belligerents on any base (Hague Convention V, 1910).

An integral part of the policy of neutrality is non-alignment. The concept was especially relevant during the Cold War and used to describe the states' policy of not supporting or participating in military blocs (NATO or Warsaw Treaty Organization). The main idea of the policy was standing outside of any bloc's sphere of influence. Once the USSR collapsed and the bloc system of international relations terminated its existence, 'non-alignment' lost its original significance, as did 'neutrality': definitions of these terms gradually changed because of the transformation of political reality. For that reason, the flexibility of the terms allows politicians to interpret them in the way which is the most suitable in each given situation; furthermore, in some cases the terms are used as synonyms (Gyldén, 2014).

Still neutral?

A common misconception about Sweden is that it has been neutral since signing the Convention of Moss in 1814. Indeed, Sweden formally has not been a side in an armed conflict since that time. For almost 200 years, the neutrality policy was aimed at isolating Sweden from the rest of war-torn Europe. As it was mentioned above, neutrality status can be permanent or temporary. However, Sweden's neutrality is less clear.

In the case of Sweden, a more fair statement is that Sweden ***maintained neutrality during wartime***, though this is also controversial. For instance, Sweden willingly traded with the Nazi Germany during World War II; furthermore, the Swedes let Germany transit personnel and equipment through their territory. Although the moral aspect of those actions is ambiguous, staying out of the war was vitally important for Sweden. The experience of Denmark and Norway demonstrates that a neutral status by itself could not guarantee safety. Thus, the concessions were rational: Sweden avoided the invasion of the Nazi troops and maintained its sovereignty. However, there is another example, it is known now, that Sweden had secret agreements on mutual defense with the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) in case of Soviet aggression (Holmström, 2011).

The neutrality of Sweden has never been stated in the constitution or any international treaty. It provided Sweden with an opportunity to be flexible in its security policy: in the 1990s Sweden easily shifted its security policy to non-alignment and became an EU member state in 1995 and, consequently, a part of the common defense and security policy (CSDP). “Of Sweden’s three official cold war ‘policy pillars’ – independence, neutrality in wartime and military non-alignment – only military non-alignment remains relevant. Independence has become interdependence, and neutrality is no longer the only, or even the most likely, option should there be a war in Europe” (Bailes et al., 2006).

According to the Inquiry on Sweden’s International Defense report, Sweden conducts a policy of military non-alignment “the essence of which is that Sweden does not extend mutual defense obligations to other countries” (Inquiry on Sweden’s International Defence and Security Cooperation, 2015).

And yet, there is a question: how can this policy line coexist with EU membership? It is evident that the policy of non-alignment with the given definition contradicts the Common Security and Defense Policy and the Lisbon Treaty commitments. However, the Swedish leaders define the CSDP as cooperation in the field of crisis management which does not contradict their policy orientation as crisis management operations do not require direct military involvement in a conflict. As concerns the Solidarity Clause of the Lisbon Treaty, it is restricted by Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union that claims the following: “prejudice the specific character of the security and defense policy of certain Member States” (Consolidate Version of the Treaty on European Union, 2008).

As the majority of the EU states are also NATO members, Sweden, which is not obliged to assist by these organizations’ commitments, has an advantage. Theoretically, if Sweden is attacked, Germany or France, for instance, will not stay outside the conflict due to Solidarity Clause of the Lisbon Treaty. Thus, Sweden is under protection of not only the EU, but also NATO.

To a large extent, as Mike Winnerstig, a member of the Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences (Kungliga Krigsvetenskapsakademien) stated, Sweden's neutrality has turned into an "ideology and a part of Sweden's identity... being a Swede is being neutral no matter what. It doesn't matter if it's completely out of touch with reality" (The Local, 2014).

Swedish perception of threats

The shifts in the defense and security policy of Sweden depend very heavily on the perception of threats. The given list of existing threats is based on analysis of official government statements and speeches¹. Both global and local threats are presented in the list.

Russian aggressive foreign policy. The Ukrainian crisis and Russian foreign policy towards it undermined stability in the European region. Since 2014, after the Crimean referendum on its inclusion into Russia, the aggressive foreign policy of Russia has become more frequently mentioned as a threat to Sweden's and other Baltic States security in official statements and speeches by Swedish politicians. They are concerned about Russia attempts to regain the "greatness of the Motherland" and once again become a world power" (Hultqvist, 2017). Nevertheless, the Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Löfven stated that there was no direct military threat to the country (Löfven, 2016).

Migration. Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa and the imperfection of migration policy provoked a huge wave of refugees to apply for asylum in Sweden. This results in numerous challenges: from the integration of immigrants into Swedish society to the cost of maintenance allowance and increasing crime rate. In recent years, Sweden has become an asylum for more than a hundred thousand refugees. The figure below shows the dynamic of asylum-seekers number over the past 5 years.

¹ Wallström, M. (2017, February 15). Statement of Government Policy. Presented at the Parliamentary Debate on Foreign Affairs 2017. Retrieved from: <http://www.government.se/statements/2017/03/statement-of-government-policy-in-the-parliamentary-debate-on-foreign-affairs-2017/>; Löfven S. (2017, January 8). Opinion piece. Speech presented at the Dagens Nyheter. Retrieved from: <http://www.government.se/opinion-pieces/2017/01/swedens-security-must-be-seen-in-a-broader-perspective/>

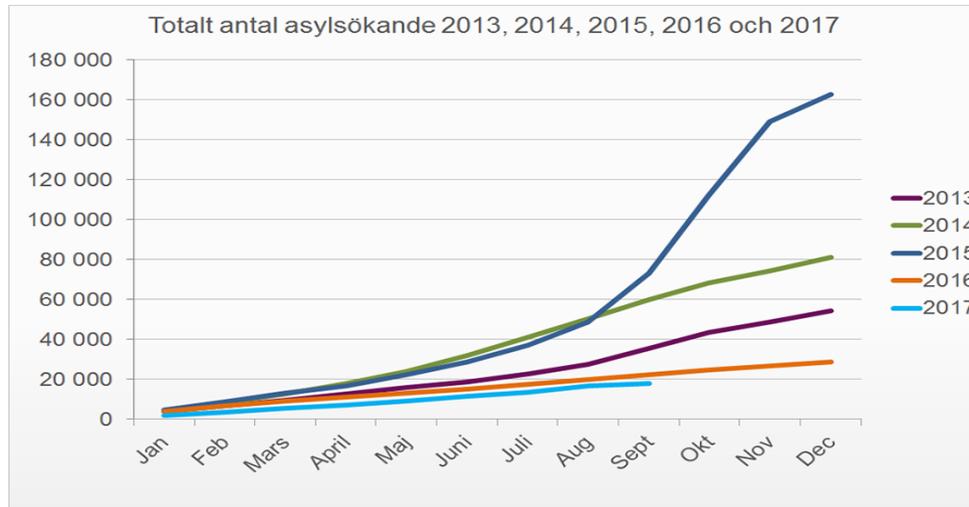


Fig. 1. The total number of asylum applications in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017

As you can see from figure 1, the number of asylum-seekers dramatically decreased from 2015 to 2016: the reason is restrictions of migration policy; in particular Sweden restored border control “in order to verify the legal right to enter and stay in the country” (Temporary border control).

Terrorism. The threat is not of the national level, but global. Currently, it has become a “new normal”. In recent years, Europe has suffered from terrorist attacks several times (Wallström, 2017a). Modern terrorism is hard to prevent as it has changed in form: people are encouraged to make an attack in their homeland from a distance, usually abroad; so, a man, who makes an attack is just an agent. After the terrorist attack on April 7, 2017, Sweden, which has been always recognized as the safest country in the world, faced the reality of this threat. The increasing level of terrorism in Sweden is closely connected to the previous threat in this list.

North Korea’s nuclear weapons. During 2017, North Korea fired 22 missiles of different range. Rapid development of Pyongyang’s missile program generated uncertainty in the world politics. Yet, the hostile rhetoric of the US President Donald Trump at the 72th UN General Assembly entirely set the world on the verge of nuclear war (The Associated Press, 2017). In such circumstances, in the author’s opinion, Sweden, as a state which has traditionally been active in the promotion of non proliferation and, in the end, elimination of nuclear weapons and, at the same time, a neutral state could be a mediator in the dialogue between the USA and North Korea aimed at preventing an armed conflict.

Climate change. In today’s context climate change has become a security issue. For instance, global warming causes the thinning of the Arctic icecap which, in turn, has its own aftermaths. First and foremost, deglaciation raises the sea level and causes flooding, which poses an existential threat to some European states. Secondly, ice-melting permits more opportunities to develop

the Arctic and increases interest in the region which is still a bone of contention. Thirdly, while some countries are at risk of being flooded, others suffer from drought: poor yields and hunger force migration. “Climate change will make the world a less safe place in many ways. Lack of food and water is a great driver of conflict. It is high time we made the connection between climate and security” (Wallström, 2017b).

Cyber security threat (Löfven, 2017b). It is hardly possible to imagine modern society without the use of high technologies in everyday life: people have become heavily reliant on hi-tech and, thus, are vulnerable to cyber-attack. One click could cut off a city from the electricity or lower a dam’s floodgates, a series of cyber-attacks could deprive people of vital services. Technologies make things easier and our life more comfortable, but at the same time they make us vulnerable.

Considering the above-mentioned threats, the government seeks to develop Sweden’s defense and security policy. The Swedish Defense Bill 2016-2020 contains a paragraph, within which an independent expert’s report on different options for “cooperation and/or membership with countries and organizations (including NATO)” needs to be presented (The Swedish Defense Bill 2016-2020, 2015). It goes on to say that the Swedish policy of non-alignment should not be an obstacle to research (ibid.). That fact shows significant changes in Sweden’s security policy and raises the question of whether Sweden is on the way to full NATO membership.

NATO: To be or not to be?

Recently full NATO-membership has become a sensitive issue for the Swedes. Russian foreign policy towards Ukraine and, therefore, the increasing level of mistrust and tensions in the Baltic region significantly influenced intensification of the debate.

However, the nature and original purposes of NATO should not be forgotten. NATO was founded as a military-political, defensive alliance to deter Soviet expansion. This purpose was relevant during the Cold War until the USSR collapsed. At that moment NATO faced an existential crisis and tried to find a new mission. It shifted to maintenance of global security through promoting democratic values and undertaking peacekeeping and crisis-management operations. Despite having a new mission, Russia-NATO relations remain suspicious: both sides assess the other as a threat.

So, is there a place for Sweden in the Alliance? The official position remains the same: the current Swedish government opposes the idea of joining NATO (Tal av Peter Hulqvist..., 2017). However, attitudes to NATO membership differ in the Riksdag. While the ruling coalition of Social Democrats and Greens stands for close cooperation between Sweden and NATO including joint exercises and participation in peacekeeping operations within the framework of the

“Partnership for Peace” program, they tend to support remaining formally non-aligned. Hence, they consider Sweden’s military non-alignment contributes to the security stability in region (Radio Sweden, 2016).

As for opposition parties, which are the Moderate party, Centre party, Liberal People’s party and Christian Democrats, they are traditionally supporters of NATO, and recognize the Alliance as a guarantor of regional security.

Party	Position	Representatives
Social Democratic Party	Against	113
Moderate party	For	84
Sweden Democrats	Against	49
Green Party	Against	25
Centre Party	For	22
Left Party	Against	21
Liberal People’s Party	For	19
Christian Democrats	For	16

Table 1. Position on NATO membership in the Riksdag

Table 1 demonstrates that the majority of Riksdag representatives do not support joining NATO, however, the forthcoming elections in September 2018 theoretically could change the proportions.

The ongoing debate on the issue divides not only the Riksdag, but also society into two camps: NATO advocates and opponents. Public polls of recent years indicate the majority of the Swedes do not support the idea of joining the Alliance. Nevertheless, year-to-year results of the polls differ. In 2015 public support for joining NATO reached the record of 41 percent, but dropped to 33 percent by 2016 (Nilsson, 2015).

As public support is highly important in the decision-making process on the issue of joining NATO, delicate policy could be conducted by the politicians to change public opinion in favor of membership of in the Alliance. For instance, media could be used not only as a tool to inform, but also as a tool to influence the formation of public opinion. The case with the Russian submarine in the Stockholm archipelago in 2014 is a great example of how it works. Sweden’s military spent several days searching for what officially was called “foreign underwater activity” (The Guardian, 2014). However, local media, with reference to Sweden’s intelligence services, suggested that it was a Russian submarine on a secret mission, which had mechanical problems (ibid.). One year after the search operation it was officially announced that nothing had been revealed and all the proofs were not applicable (Sveriges radio, 2016).

That fact allows us to conclude that media may have been used as a political tool to deteriorate the image of Russia in society, which subsequently may affect the decision-making process on full membership in NATO. However, there are both advantages and disadvantages of joining the Alliance

Clarity. While Sweden strengthens ties with NATO without joining the Alliance, it is difficult to foresee its behavior in a crisis. As a researcher in Swedish Defence Research Agency Tomas Malmlöf justly noted during an interview, “It is hard to play a game, when nobody knows the rules” (T. Malmlöf, personal communication, March 23, 2017). In the Swedish case, full membership would clarify its defense policy and consequently provide stability and increase trust among all Baltic Sea states. The key argument against is that membership would conversely irritate Russia. Here it is worth mentioning that expansion of NATO closer to Russia’s borders is regarded as a substantial threat to its national security. It is obvious that Russia would react to diminish the threat. In June 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin commented on the issue, “... it does not mean that we will get hysterical and get our missiles ready, but we will think about an appropriate response” (UNIAN Information Agency, 2017). Still, the membership would bring Swedish security policy out of the twilight zone.

Security guaranties. For the current moment, Sweden is highly integrated into NATO structures, and it is still deepening cooperation with the Alliance. It is reasonable to assume that Sweden seeks to be protected by NATO. Nevertheless, NATO former Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen forewarned Sweden that it could not count on assistance from NATO while it is not a member (Sveriges Radio, 2013).

Responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the Baltic region. The Baltic Sea region is traditionally unstable due to geopolitical factors, as it unites the states with different political orientations – NATO member-states (Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Germany), neutral Sweden and Finland, and Russia. Despite the EU solidarity principle, Sweden, as well as Finland, still has options on how to react in cases of crisis or attack.

Influence. Being a member of NATO, Sweden could participate in the decision making process and influence the Alliance’s activities to a different extent. Thus, Sweden would have an additional platform to promote its interests.

Increase of military spending. Sweden has decreased defense spending in the last 10 years: from 1.3% of GDP in 2006 to 1.0% of GDP in 2016 (The World Bank, 2016). If Sweden becomes a full NATO member-state, it will have to undertake military spending at 2% of GDP and above. However, only five of 29 NATO member-states (namely, USA, Greece, Poland, Estonia and the United Kingdom) have implemented this requirement. The reason is that it has declarative character and there is no penalty for failure.

Meanwhile some opponents of NATO suggest very radical solutions of the security issues, including military spending. The activist of the organization “No to NATO membership” (“Nej till NATO”), Pelle Sunvisson in the interview pointed out that ensuring the state’s defense capability is expensive for society, and abandonment of military forces would allow the government to redirect the budget to other spheres, for instance, to the social sector. In addition, he suggested, “if Sweden abolishes armed forces, it will provide a security of a brand new level” (P. Sunvisson, personal communication, April 5, 2017). By that, he refers to two main ideas:

- None of the countries would attack defenseless state due to the moral consideration.
- In case of aggression, unarmed state could rely on assistance from other countries.

The suggestion is questionable; it contradicts the basic concept of any defense policies: inability to repel threats causes them to emerge.

Freedom of actions restriction. As a full member of the Alliance, Sweden would be bound by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which contains the main principle of collective defense, an aggression against one is considered as an aggression against all the participants (The North Atlantic Treaty, 1949). Hence, Sweden risks being dragged into unwilling conflict.

NATO nuclear strategy. The Article 5 of the Washington Treaty urges the members of the Alliance to use all means to assist that member, which is attacked. The article could be interpreted in such a way that nuclear weapons are acceptable to be used in case of emergency. However, such a situation is totally unsustainable for Sweden as cornerstones of its position on nuclear weapons are non-proliferation and prohibition. And yet, there are no obligatory treaties within NATO concerning nuclear weapons.

Theoretically, if Sweden signs the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and then joins NATO, it will establish a precedent and spur a chain reaction: other NATO-umbrella states may join the Treaty. Thus, it would have considerable impact on NATO nuclear states and the nuclear disarmament process.

Options for the development of security policy

In the Parliamentary Debate on Foreign Affairs in February of 2008 former prime-minister Carl Bild noted “... the future security of our country is founded on community and cooperation with other countries” (Statement of Government Policy in the Parliamentary Debate on Foreign Affairs, 2008). And this is the case, in the new reality of the contemporary world, where all the states are interdependent, the security of one state is based not only on national defense,

but more often on international defense cooperation. It is hardly conceivable that a crisis in one state would not affect its neighbouring states or even further afield. That is why international cooperation on security and defense is essential.

Self-defense. It is the less preferable option, as it requires high military spending. Currently, despite having modern and hi-tech military equipment, Sweden is unable to defend itself by its own means. As the former Supreme Commander, Sverker Göransson, stated “Sweden could only hold out for a week if it were attacked” (Nilsson, 2015).

Besides, it is hard just to suppose that Sweden will be face-to-face in case of an attack against it. Nevertheless, it is reckless to count solely on external assistance.: Sweden should have its own strong military capability to resist threats.

Bilateral cooperation. The bilateral agreements between Sweden and Finland in the field of military cooperation have proven their credibility through the long-term. In autumn 2013, the two countries announced the intent to continue defense cooperation with the aim of increasing security and stability in the region, but also to establish a better use of resources and cost-efficiency in defense-related areas.

The joint final report, published on January 31, 2015 includes the following steps for cooperation:

- “- the development of a bilateral standing Naval Task Group, The Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG), with full operational capability by 2023,
- an increased level of interoperability between the Swedish and Finnish Air Forces with the capacity for joint operation, common base operations and common command and control (C2) capability;
- the development of a combined Finnish - Swedish Brigade Framework” (Final reports on deepened defence cooperation between Finland and Sweden, 2015).

By strengthening bilateral Swedish-Finnish defense cooperation, Sweden improves its own and regional security, reaffirms its commitment to a policy of military non-alignment and thereby adjusts relations with Russia.

Multilateral cooperation. Multilateral defense cooperation is currently the most appropriate way to ensure security. It requires for every side’s efforts and opportunities to eliminate threats of any level. Besides, cooperation is based on a dialog, within which the sides agree on acceptable measures to counter threats. “...the fact that collaboration between nations often produces win-win situations and common security is well documented. The EU is one good example – perhaps one of the most successful peace projects the world has ever seen” (Wallström, 2017b).

Conclusion

In the era of globalization, the concept of neutrality has lost its relevance. The increasing significance of joint response to new challenges and threats to the world's stability and security has become evident during the last few decades. Integration processes and their advantages caused a shift in the security policy of Sweden from traditional neutrality to military non-alignment, which could hardly be distinguished in terms of their definitions.

According to this study, analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of joining the Alliance, benefits of Sweden's NATO membership prevail. Nevertheless, keeping in mind neutrality policy, which enabled Sweden to stay out of the World Wars and not to be under the sphere of influences of any military block during the Cold War, the Swedes are not in a hurry to join the Alliance.

Besides, despite the disputes in the Riksdag, the ruling coalition of the Social Democrats and the Greens retains the policy of non-alignment, meanwhile strengthening ties with NATO. Thus, Sweden is not a neutral or non-aligned state in the classic sense: it is balancing between the Alliance and declared non-alignment status according to its national interests. Currently, there is no vital need for Sweden to join the Alliance, now the country is in a win-win position: according to the Lisbon Treaty, in case of aggression it would be protected by the EU-member states, the majority of which are also NATO-states.

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