

# National Defence and the Baltic Sea Region: Sweden's New Focus

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**The security situation in the Baltic Sea region has deteriorated over the past decade. A more threatening Russia has led Sweden to shift its focus from the situation in distant lands to its more immediate neighbourhood. National security and national defence are once again on the agenda, but both resource allocation and attitudes remain influenced by the many years in which peace and security could be taken for granted. In addition, the ship of state is slow to turn. The known weaknesses in both Sweden's armed forces and total defence expose the need for urgent measures. Analysis and policy formation are hampered, however, by an unwillingness to openly discuss Sweden's national interests and the growing threats against them. The Swedish national security strategy published earlier this year must be supplemented by clearer objectives, additional financial resources and sharper methods for addressing the vulnerabilities resulting from decades of wishful thinking, underfinancing and insufficient threat-awareness.**

## FROM SUNSHINE TO STORM WARNING

The decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall was a period of rosy optimism when it was widely assumed that Russia was no longer threatening or dangerous and military power was no longer needed in Europe. Western Europe disarmed, the USA withdrew almost all of its units and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) turned its attention to peace-support operations in distant lands.

Sweden also downsized its military defence and adapted it to international missions, while the civilian components of the elaborate total defence concept were simply disbanded.<sup>1</sup> In planning, attention to preparedness issues vanished since these were considered outdated and irrelevant. Core societal functions were deregulated and streamlined in anticipation of a

<sup>1</sup> The Swedish concept of "total defence" includes all activities needed to prepare Sweden for war. Total defence contains both military activities (military defence) and civil activities (civil defence).

peaceful and liberal new world order.

The concept of security was broadened and reinterpreted through a postmodern lens: states and their sovereignty were set to reduce in importance. The focus shifted to human security, life, health and welfare. To the extent that threats were foreseen, they were of a new kind and the actors were non-military and non-state, such as climate change, pandemics, large-scale migration flows and terrorism.

Russia's more aggressive stance after 2007 and its war in Georgia in 2008 should have served as a wake-up call, but Sweden and the rest of the West pressed the snooze button. To be fair, more robust objectives focused on state security, sovereignty and freedom of action in the face of external threats did appear in the 2009 defence bill alongside the earlier postmodern "objectives for our security". The armed forces were also asked to "assert Sweden's sovereignty, protect sovereign rights and national interests" and demands for military preparedness increased. Nonetheless, the emphasis on keeping costs down and on peacetime operations eclipsed these signals. As late as January 2014, the then Prime Minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, declared that an interstate war in Europe was no longer conceivable.

Consequently, it was a brutal awakening when, less than two months later, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea. It suddenly dawned on Sweden that the world had become dangerous again. Russia was rejecting the European security order and trying to carve its own sphere of influence using threats and violence. Moreover, in a conflict between Russia and NATO, the Baltic States would be NATO's Achilles heel. Thus, the Baltic Sea area became the focal point of the new Cold War – and if war should come to the region Sweden would inevitably be drawn in. To make matters worse, in 2016 the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union and Donald J. Trump was elected President of the USA, which raised doubts about whether NATO and the EU could be counted on as reliable counterweights to Russia.



Despite the heightened tension, the risk of an open war is low. Even though we live in a state of formal peace, however, a struggle for power and influence is under way in the region. Major Russian exercises, threatening fly-pasts and new weapon systems should not be seen primarily as preparations for war, but as a form of “strategic bullying” where the message is that neighbouring countries are small and weak, Russia is big and bad, and the USA had better stay away. This message is reinforced through a skilful campaign of psychological warfare that uses digital media to spread mistrust of Western decision-makers and tries to undermine Western unity. Thus far, however, unity has prevailed and the Russian campaign seems to have had the opposite effect. The countries in the region are now strengthening their armed forces, and the USA and other major Western powers are paying much more attention to the neighbourhood.

#### **VULNERABLE SWEDEN**

After Russia’s land grab in Crimea, Sweden appeared poorly protected and the postmodern security agenda of the 2000s seemed passé. National security could no longer be taken for granted and we became painfully aware of threats and vulnerabilities that had earlier been ignored. It was not just the weakness of the military defence or the fact that Russia had new weapons – it was also the absence of a civil defence and society’s heightened susceptibility to power outages, cyberattacks and other disturbances. The mental map needed to be drastically adjusted, the security agenda rewritten and new priorities set. It is possible to argue that Sweden quickly tumbled down Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, from being a global do-gooder to ensuring its own security and survival.

This became apparent from the 2015 defence bill and the process that preceded it. The general public’s perception was that defence spending would increase somewhat and Gotland once again be defended by troops, but there were also other important signals, for example the return of concepts such as national defence, state sovereignty, war-fighting capability and mobilisation. Furthermore, operational capability was re-emphasised, conscription reinstated and a new version of total defence planned. Attention to the needs of war and preparedness were again to be made part of public planning.

Early in 2017, the government presented its *National Security Strategy*, developed by the Cabinet Office, in which Sweden’s national interests are articulated. As a strategy, and as a policy document for the administrative authorities, the document falls short, since it is something of a wish list without clear priorities or any indication of how the objectives are to be met. Nonetheless, the strategy is the first official and public expression of Sweden’s national interests.

#### **SWEDEN’S NATIONAL INTERESTS**

Sweden’s political class has a long-held disdain for the notion of national interests, since the term is derived from the Realist school of international relations – a coldly calculating tradition that emphasizes self-interest and rejects idealism. Thus, the concept was anathema to the foreign policy establishment in the decades when Swedish foreign policy was shaped by progressive values and aimed to play a global role. Nonetheless, actual policy continued to be governed by national interests, as has been the case since the early 1800s.

It is the national interest not to end up in a war with Russia that has been behind the policy of careful neutrality pursued since 1812. Similarly, it was the national interest in having a counterbalance to Russian influence that was behind our discreet – and at times secretive – reinsurance policy towards the Western powers. Our national interest also guided the departures from a line of strict neutrality that kept us out of the Second World War. In addition, when the Swedish model of the mixed economy crashed in 1990 it was the need for a functioning economy that suddenly turned EU membership into a national interest.

Using national interests as an analytical tool and a guide to practical policies makes it possible to shed light on structures and circumstances that are often taken for granted, but require attention and care if they are to persist. For example, the current regime of free trade and freedom of navigation is a prerequisite for our national welfare, and our national security is dependent on the existence of barriers to the renationalisation of European security, as well as on the US nuclear weapons-backed security guarantee for Europe.

Although the national interest is a useful concept for analysis and for the pursuit of practical policies, it is problematic in some respects. Its proponents often



portray national interests as objective and bordering on the irrefutable. While this may be the case, the national interests exist only at such an elevated level of abstraction that they are also useless as a guide to policy. To guide policy, one must also be able to derive answers from these fundamental interests about *how* these objectives are to be attained, and *with what*. This is where an unavoidable degree of subjectivity enters the picture, not least because there are often several alternative ways to achieve the same goal.

Another problem is where to draw the line between values and interests. In some cases, there seems to be a measure of overlap, since values that are central to a nation's self-image – such as democracy – are also seen as national interests. On other occasions, values and interests clash. This has obviously been the case recently concerning the global ban on nuclear weapons, weapons exports and Swedish policy on the Arab world.

Finally, it must be possible to weigh national interests against one other. For instance, Sweden could further its economic interests by purchasing Russian gas, since it is cheap, but its security interests would be imperilled due to the dependence arising from such a transaction. Competing interests must therefore be ranked or weighed against each other. The outcome of such a priority setting procedure is often context-dependent. When relations are friendly, it may seem unproblematic to say yes to a Russian gas pipeline, but if the situation is tense and threatening priorities will be different.

This phenomenon helps explain the recent change of tune in Sweden's security policies; its sharp criticism of Russia's aggressive acts, ongoing upgrading of its armed forces and increasing emphasis on military cooperation with neighbouring countries, the USA and NATO. These changes have been dubbed the "Hultqvist doctrine", after the defence minister, but are of course also supported by the prime minister.

#### **FROM WISH LIST TO REALISTIC STRATEGY**

Despite the important steps taken in recent years to adapt to a more threatening and dangerous world, most notably recent agreement on the 2018–2020 defence budget, the reorientation comes across as fumbling and half-hearted. The government's national security strategy still in large part resembles a wish list. Most of

our structures, systems, thought patterns and attitudes are shaped by the decades when no dangers appeared to loom. The outsourcing to foreign companies of sensitive IT services by the Swedish Transport Agency, the city of Karlskrona's installation of a web camera to record the movements of naval vessels and the port of Karlshamn's refusal to decline a Russian gas pipeline are just a few examples of security issues still not being taken seriously. Several chapters in *Strategic Outlook 7* highlight potential threats to national security – but few strategies or tools are in place for coping with these risks.

The government now says that national defence is a core task of the state and claims to be committed to enhancing security. Despite certain increases in spending, however, the military and civilian defence budgets still hover around 1 per cent of GNP. No new capabilities are to be funded and the cash infusion will only suffice to fill the worst shortfalls in funding from the 2015 defence bill – this at a time when it is predicted that the state budget will be in record surplus. If the government is serious and the cause is urgent, shouldn't we expect a little more?

National security is costly and cumbersome, since it makes the execution of tasks more complicated and difficult. In past decades, Sweden knowingly and unknowingly under-financed its armed forces and dismantled the elaborate system of total defence system (see "Defence Economics and Defence Allocations" in *Strategic Outlook 7*). Worse still, the security implications of our dependence on the electricity grid and on Internet services have not been taken into account. This exposes us to significant vulnerabilities that an aggressor could exploit in times of war or crisis. Today, awareness of the altered threat environment has finally begun to sink in, but the political will to finance reforms and change ingrained habits still lags behind.

An increase in funding and the addition of other resources are urgently needed, but so is a clear shift in Swedish strategic thinking that takes account of the demands that a more precarious world places on Swedish society. To successfully navigate the tense geopolitical situation, it is of vital importance that Sweden's decision-makers have a clear picture of what our national interests are, how – if need be – these can be weighed against one other, and the means and methods essential to achieving them.



#### **FURTHER READING**

Robert Dalsjö, “Hubris, Nemesis and the Search for Kryptonite: Why Eternal Peace Lasted Only 25 Years”, blogpost, 19 January 2017, on the *Defence and Security* blog, Royal Swedish Academy of War Sciences, [www.kkrva.se](http://www.kkrva.se).