

# Building interoperability with partners – Swedish lessons from international military missions

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**Swedish defence policy is prioritising national defence again. Compared to the Cold War era, current Swedish doctrine emphasises that security is built together with others, making collaboration and interoperability with international partners more important. This memo aims to explore whether the expectation that international missions result in greater interoperability with partners and provide operational benefits for national defence holds. The analysis indicates that international missions increase individual learning, build trust in training, procedures and systems, enhance specialised functions, and provide important lessons on logistics and support functions. At the same time, building interoperability with partners requires continuity, which may put a strain on resources for national defence. In the future, it is important that Sweden's participation in international missions continues to reflect an engagement in pressing international security crises, but that it at the same time provides opportunities to build relationships with partners who are relevant in the Baltic Sea context.**

## Evolving priorities for the Swedish Armed Forces

The recent Swedish defence bill and the new instruction for the Swedish Armed Forces make it clear that national defence is the main task of the Swedish Armed Forces.<sup>1</sup> This implies a de-prioritisation of international missions compared to the past era of a slimmed operational defence structure focusing on international missions.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, collaboration with key partners, including operational cooperation on defending Sweden's territorial integrity, is more important for national defence than before.<sup>3</sup> Although Swedish official doctrine states that Sweden is not part of any military alliance, the unilateral declaration of solidarity with EU members and Nordic countries, and the dependency on military assistance from partners in the case of conflict, unmistakably link international collaboration and national defence.<sup>4</sup>

In this new defence policy era, international military missions are, among other things, expected to provide direct operational benefits for national defence. This study analyses how international military missions relate to

such expected gains. It does so by mapping both the ways in which international missions may influence national defence, in general, and what the consequences are for interoperability between Sweden and international partners, in particular. The aim is to start exploring whether the political expectation that international missions provide operational benefits for national defence holds. The study is guided by the following research question:

How do international military missions influence Swedish national defence, in particular as concerns the Armed Forces' interoperability with core partners?

Interoperability is defined in the study as the ability of "forces, units or systems to operate together to achieve common objectives".<sup>5</sup> In the literature, the rationale for interoperability varies, but often focuses on efficiency or reaching commonly defined goals. Interoperability can furthermore refer to coordination across branches within an organisation, or alignment with other states or

1 Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 Totalförsvaret 2021–2025; Förordning (2007:1266) med instruktion för Försvarsmakten.

2 Hellquist, Elin, and Tidblad-Lundholm, Kajsa, *National Defence and International Military Missions - The Swedish Armed Forces at home and abroad 1958–2020*, FOI-R--5060--SE, 2021, p. 41.

3 Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 Totalförsvaret 2021–2025; Försvarsmakten, Doktrin för gemensamma operationer, 2020.

4 Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 Totalförsvaret 2021–2025, p. 27; Försvarsmakten, Doktrin för gemensamma operationer, 2020.

5 NATO, *Backgrounder - Interoperability for joint operations*, July 2006, p. 1.

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actors.<sup>6</sup> Conceptually, interoperability is often described as consisting of both technical and non-technical dimensions, such as procedures and human resources.<sup>7</sup> This typology is used in the text to categorise observations on how lessons from international missions may translate into operational benefits and enhanced interoperability with partners who are relevant for national defence.

The ambition of this study is to make an initial assessment of how senior officers involved in recent larger international military missions perceive the link between international missions and Sweden's national defence, focusing on direct operational benefits and increased interoperability. Given that limited primary source material was collected, the findings are tentative and intended to pave the way for future research.

The following section takes its departure in official publications and previous research to describe how international missions are expected to provide operational benefits for national defence. Furthermore, it presents the study's methodological considerations regarding the selection of cases and material. The ensuing three sections present the study's empirical results relating to lessons for national defence, interoperability with partners and the variations in findings between missions. The final section presents the study's conclusions about the relationship between international missions and national defence and gives some recommendations for future Swedish participation in such missions.

## Background and methodology

Although international missions are less of a priority for Sweden nowadays, Sweden remains committed to participating in them under UN, NATO, EU and *ad hoc* coalition leadership. According to the recent defence bill, international missions may provide a range of direct benefits for Swedish national defence. The most significant benefit is that participation in international military missions

strengthens Sweden's bilateral and multilateral collaboration with key partners, which may also contribute to security in Sweden's immediate neighbourhood. In addition, international missions provide valuable experience for the armed forces, facilitate recruitment and enhance the skills of individual soldiers. Sweden's engagement in mission areas may also directly contribute to its national security.<sup>8</sup>

In the same defence bill, the relationship between international cooperation and national defence is expressed as a set of capabilities and linkages, tied to the expectation of elevating the capability and the interoperability of the Swedish Armed Forces with core partners, especially the ability to conduct common operations. Common exercises with partners as well as international military missions are expected to strengthen international collaborations and improve the Swedish capability to give and receive military support in the event of crisis or war.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Sweden aims to develop common operational planning with Finland and coordinated operational planning with partners such as Denmark, Norway, the UK, the US and NATO.<sup>10</sup> International military missions are thus expected to give direct experience that benefits national defence, and to increase the capability of the Swedish Armed Forces to cooperate with partner countries and organisations.

Previous FOI research has examined how international military missions relate to national defence. In 2016, FOI thoroughly evaluated the impact of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan on the Swedish Armed Forces across different levels, i.e., those of the individual, unit/capability and armed forces. The conclusion was that the mission provided a common focus and a reality check for the armed forces, which enhanced capabilities and interoperability with partners at all levels. At the same time, the focus on irregular warfare and the priority given to international missions resulted in negative consequences for the capability for high-intensity warfare and national defence.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, according to the latest

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6 NATO, *Backgrounder - Interoperability for joint operations*, July 2006, p. 1; Försvarmakten, *Doktrin för gemensamma operationer*, 2020, p. 97; Roosberg, Henric, *Framträdande erfarenheter av multinationell ledning och icke-teknisk interoperabilitet från insatsen i Kosovo 1999-2013*. FOI Memo 4909; RAND, *Interoperability*, 2000.

7 NATO, *Backgrounder - Interoperability for joint operations*, July 2006, p. 1; Försvarmakten, *Doktrin för gemensamma operationer*, 2020, p. 97.

8 Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 *Totalförsvaret 2021–2025*, p. 79.

9 Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 *Totalförsvaret 2021–2025*, p. 70–71.

10 Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 *Totalförsvaret 2021–2025*, p. 28.

11 FOI, *Det är på riktigt nu! Hur det svenska Isaf-deltagandet har påverkat Försvarmakten*, FOI-2015-1631, 2016.

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defence bill, participation in international military missions should be subject to careful consideration and be based on capabilities developed for national defence.<sup>12</sup> As the present analysis shows, many of the lessons from the ISAF mission reoccur in the international missions covered in this study.

In 2021, Hellquist and Tidblad-Lundholm analysed how five ideas underlying the nexus between international military missions and national defence were present in Swedish defence bills since 1958. They proposed that the following five different ideas underlaid the relationship:

1. that there is a 'trade-off' between international missions and national defence, due to resource scarcity;
2. that international missions can be of 'instrumental value' and provide benefits to national defence;
3. that they are in effect 'two sides of the same coin', as threats to national security can be defused on foreign soil;
4. that they have a 'give-and-take' relationship, as demonstrating solidarity towards partners in international missions may later provide security benefits at home; and
5. that participating in international military missions promotes certain 'foreign policy' norms rather than directly contributing to national defence.<sup>13</sup>

While the study concludes that there has been a more multifaceted view of the relationship since 2014, recent Swedish defence bills have increasingly stressed the instrumental value of international missions for national defence; the study ranks this as being the primary view, currently.<sup>14</sup>

To provide a full picture of how international missions affect national defence, several types of missions would need to be systematically assessed.<sup>15</sup> For reasons of feasibility and analytical relevance, this study focuses on missions with larger Swedish troop contributions. Hence,

missions consisting of a few staff officers are not included. The analysis is also delineated to the recent past; only international missions that have been active in the past decade are considered.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, Swedish contributions to the following international military missions are studied:

- EU operation EUNAVFOR Somalia, Operation Atalanta, in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean. Navy missions in 2009–2017.
- NATO Operation Unified Protector (OUP), in Libya. Air force mission in 2011.
- UN operation MINUSMA, in Mali. Army, naval infantry and air force contributions since 2014.

An additional benefit of this case selection is that all three military branches of the Swedish Armed Forces are covered, providing an opportunity to compare and contrast possible variations and commonalities in the lessons in interoperability and the operational benefits for national defence.

The sources for this study consist of previous FOI research and ten in-depth interviews with Swedish staff officers who have worked directly with international missions. Interviews were conducted with two categories of respondents: first, desk officers in the Joint Forces Command and staff officers in leadership positions within the three branches of the Swedish Armed Forces and, secondly, officers who have led Swedish contingents to the selected international missions.<sup>17</sup> This rather small empirical basis does not offer the final word on the topic, but can shed light on some important issues that merit further analysis.

### Lessons for national defence

The strongest pattern in the interview data regards the unique character of international missions. All respondents attribute international missions with providing a unique opportunity for learning and enhancing capabilities and collaborations with partners. This translates into both tangible benefits and challenges, balancing the demands

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12 Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 Totalförsvaret 2021–2025.

13 Hellquist and Tidblad-Lundholm, *National Defence and International Military Missions*, p. 17–28.

14 Ibid., p. 56.

15 The Swedish Armed Forces delineate between larger troop contributions and smaller missions consisting of a few staff officers or observers. In 2021, the Swedish Armed Forces participated in 12 international missions, with tasks ranging from military observation to capacity-building, stabilisation and peace enforcement.

16 Hellquist and Tidblad-Lundholm, *National Defence and International Military Missions*.

17 There is some overlap between the two categories, as officers change positions over time.

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of national defence with the goals of the international mission. Two characteristics make international missions inherently different from the national Swedish context.

First, international missions put personnel, procedures and systems to the test in a real conflict situation. These operational experiences typically have a much higher real and/or perceived threat level and are therefore distinct from training and exercises at home. Secondly, the international context is almost always characterised by tasks and tactics that differ from typical situations planned for in national defence. Respondents commonly describe that the goals of the mission have principal priority over opportunities to gain nationally relevant experiences. The differences between the national and the international arenas condition what lessons can be drawn for national defence from international missions. Below is an account of both benefits and challenges across three levels: from the individual, through units, all the way up to the level of the armed forces.

#### *Experiences at the individual level*

Overall, the most common response regarding the question of benefits for national defence from participation in international missions relates to the individual soldier and officer.<sup>18</sup> The unique character of a mission, where soldiers and officers spend all their time in or close to a conflict zone, enables faster learning and accumulation of experiences, far from the normal daily work and routines at home in Sweden. As one respondent put it: “It is for real”. A reoccurring response is that participation in international missions offers an opportunity to validate and build trust in skills, procedures and systems developed nationally.<sup>19</sup> This narrative also appears in the existing literature evaluating past missions.<sup>20</sup> Barring severe accidents and the risk of casualties, respondents emphasise the benefits of putting both the individual soldier and commanding officers as well as staff officers to the test, while sharpening basic soldier skills, tactics and procedures. The majority of the respondents are officers in leadership positions and it is evident that international missions amplify experiences not only for soldiers. There is an integral difference between

working as a senior officer who has 250 subordinates in the field and working in an office environment in Sweden with tasks that largely follow different routines.

Many of our respondents also argue that individual lessons learned spread into and influence the organisation as a whole, to the benefit of national defence.<sup>21</sup> A concrete example of how individual experiences have built benefits with a reach beyond the individual level is Sweden’s mission in Libya. Despite the small contribution in terms of number of airplanes, and a limited type of mission including only reconnaissance tasks, in total many Swedish fighter pilots and a large group of supporting staff from different units in Sweden participated in the operation’s different rotations. Today, experience from the mission remains alive and present among senior pilots and instructors throughout the Swedish Air Force.

#### *Limited value at the unit level*

For the Swedish wartime order of battle, there are two reasons why the benefits from international missions are limited. Firstly, each mission is unique, focusing on tasks that are often different from those performed in national defence. Secondly, units are formed of staff from different parts of the Swedish Armed Forces. This means that in no case is a deployed contingent the same as an extant war-fighting unit in Sweden, nor is the contribution large enough to be representative of how an actual operational unit would act in typical national defence scenarios. All respondents but two explicitly discuss that this limits the possible benefits for units in the wartime order of battle. In addition to these primarily organisational reasons and the fact that resources are limited, the tactics in the operational environment are not the same. Although the risk level is higher in international missions compared to training and exercises, the national defence scenario is characterised by a high-end antagonist and larger risk-taking in defending the national territory. International missions are often characterised by fundamentally different antagonists and tasks, and lower risk-taking.<sup>22</sup> In general, these differences in operational environment reduce the possible benefits for national defence at the unit level. In addition, there

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18 As all respondents are officers, the reader is reminded that the experiences described are the direct experiences of the officers and their perception of the soldiers’ experiences.

19 Respondents 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10.

20 FOI, *Det är på riktigt nu!*

21 Respondents 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9.

22 Respondents 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10.

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is a risk of learning wrong practices from the missions. In the extreme case, several respondents warn that individuals and whole units could need retraining when returning home, due to the differences in tactics and risk-taking.<sup>23</sup>

However, many of the respondents argued that the international missions fulfil an important role in catalysing the development and implementation of new functions.<sup>24</sup> The most commonly discussed example is advanced Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) functions, which reflects the fact that Sweden has been responsible for reconnaissance in both the MINUSMA and OUP Libya missions. Other examples are Search and Rescue/Medical evacuation and Close Air Support capabilities. In addition, most respondents representing the navy and the air force missions to Somalia and Libya describe these missions as having some benefits for national units. This relates to the fact that each mission is centred on an aircraft or naval vessel. Even though Swedish conditions are inherently different, a naval mission consists of a complete crew on board a naval vessel and an air force mission of the complete support structure around a fully functional (but small) unit of airplanes. Thus, compared to missions using ground forces, the full logistical and support systems are more similar to how these units function in national defence and thus test and enhance units in a way that is relevant for the Swedish wartime order of battle.

It is also at the unit level that trade-offs between the needs of the international missions and national defence become most clear. While the EU NAVFOR Atalanta and Libya missions stand out as positive experiences, not least due to the historical scarcity of naval and air force missions, it is also clear that resources are limited. If soldiers and officers from extant war-fighting units are taken from the national organisation and beyond a certain threshold, the national readiness and capacity inevitably start to decline. All in all, respondents make it clear that weighing the benefits of participation in international

missions and the reduction in capacity nationally are tricky, for these reasons.<sup>25</sup> The trade-off thus constitutes a clear pattern, again confirming previous findings.<sup>26</sup> Striking a balance between national and international commitments remains a goal for the Swedish Armed Forces.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Building lessons at the armed forces level*

Benefits for national defence at the level of the armed forces were discussed by the respondents in two different ways: i) as benefits resulting from mechanisms primarily *internal to Sweden's mission and contingent*, and ii) as benefits that require interaction between *Sweden and external actors*.

For the internal mechanism, the benefits for national defence emerge from a range of processes. These include: individual learning and the above-described mechanism of international missions validating systems and practices that spread in the organisation; benefits from developing and testing new capabilities or systems of importance to national defence;<sup>28</sup> and experiences from the planning and coordination of complex operations.<sup>29</sup> All respondents provided examples of instrumental value beyond the individual, and all respondents but one argued that these lessons and benefits are widespread and that international missions can benefit national defence as a whole.

The respondent that did not describe tangible – or as clear cut – links between the international mission and benefits for national defence still noted the same benefits for the individual, but further emphasised the priority of national defence. That is, the respondent saw a stronger trade-off between international and national tasks, which results in a more negative view of international missions. The reader should be reminded that the selection of respondents, where all but two had personal experience of participation in international missions, likely influences the balance between perceived instrumental values and negative trade-offs. This concern, as expressed by one of our respondents, also illustrates the general balancing

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23 Respondents 1, 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10.

24 Respondents 2, 3, 5, 5, 7, 9.

25 Respondents 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10.

26 Hellquist and Tidblad-Lundholm, *National Defence and International Military Missions*.

27 Regeringens proposition 2020/21:30 Totalförsvaret 2021–2025.

28 Respondents 2, 3, 5, 5, 7, 9. Examples of new functions or capabilities developed include close air support, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, and Search and Rescue/Medical evacuation.

29 Respondents 4, 9, 7.

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act between spending resources on national defence or on international missions that is discussed further below.

The external mechanism relates to the benefits for national defence developed through interactions between *Sweden and external actors*. Respondents here emphasised two processes. First, international missions offer an instrumental value for national defence through the tangible collaboration and coordination with partners.<sup>30</sup> The instrumental value centres on lessons learned and experiences of collaboration and coordination with partners of importance to Swedish defence when conducting joint operations. Experience thus builds interoperability in terms of language, procedures, and understanding of leadership styles and culture among partners (which is further described in the following section). Learning in international missions is thus similar to, and complements, exercises with partners, but with the added benefit of the unique context of operating in a conflict environment. The benefits noted for national defence are often explicit. As one respondent put it: “The benefits from conducting international missions are immense. The better we know our partners, the easier it is to conduct common operations”. This value of getting to know the culture and routines of partner countries and organisations was emphasised by several respondents.

The second type of value is the perceived political benefits for national defence that emerge from the signal sent by Sweden through its participation in international missions. About half of the respondents explicitly discussed the importance of Sweden being committed to the international arena and common security challenges.<sup>31</sup> Respondents here highlight the fact that participation in international missions showcases Sweden’s capabilities and confirms that Sweden is a trustworthy partner. This is argued to have the indirect effect of improving our bi- and multilateral relationships and increasing the probability of receiving help in a situation of conflict or crisis in Sweden’s immediate neighbourhood. The indications for this narrative of ‘give-and-take’ are somewhat weaker in our study than for instrumental value, which thus confirms the tendency identified in previous analysis of Swedish defence bills.<sup>32</sup>

### Enhancing interoperability with partners

Participation in international missions can also build interoperability with partners in ways that are relevant for national defence. In this section, the focus is on the effect of international military missions on three dimensions of interoperability: technical, procedural, and human resources. In particular, this section explores how prepared the Swedish Armed Forces are for common operations in terms of communication systems, procedures, and cultural awareness, all of which are also important in a national context.

Of the different dimensions of interoperability, most respondents highlight the fact that the human or cultural dimensions benefit most from participation in international missions. Whereas technical obstacles can be significant, considering that Sweden is not a member of NATO, such problems can often be pragmatically solved in the context of a particular mission. Since the end of the Cold War, moreover, the Swedish Armed Forces have gradually adapted their procedures to become NATO-compatible. In addition, earlier international missions have provided insight on how to prepare and operate in an international context. Yet, common values and cultural understanding remain fundamental to achieving close and effective collaboration with partners in a particular mission.

#### *Technical workarounds necessary*

In the event of a crisis in Sweden’s immediate neighbourhood, having access to a common command, control and communication system is imperative early on in a conflict. However, as a non-member of NATO, Sweden does not have automatic access to NATO’s command, control and communication systems. Swedish contingents experienced this both outside the coast of Somalia, in the EU Operation Atalanta, which initially used NATO’s communication system, and in the NATO operation in Libya.<sup>33</sup> The Swedish ISR Task Force in the UN operation in Mali also experienced problems transferring requested information using the UN communication system. But this related more to the sensitivities involved in sharing intelligence

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30 Respondents 1, 5, 6, 8, 10.

31 Respondents 2, 7, 9, 10.

32 Hellquist and Tidblad-Lundholm, *National Defence and International Military Missions*, p. 57.

33 Tham Lindell, Magdalena and Weibull, Anna, *Sveriges militära bidrag till Operation Atalanta 2013. En insatsanalys av ME03*, FOI-R--3728--SE, 2013, p. 25, ME 01-02, Libyen p. 22.

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and raw data with a broad range of actors than to the incompatibility of technical systems.<sup>34</sup>

The problem of not having access to the common command, control and communications system has been solved in the above missions through workaround arrangements with partners. When Sweden provided the Force Headquarters (FHQ) for operation Atalanta in 2010, a communication system and staff from the UK and a liaison officer from the US were placed aboard the Swedish command vessel, *HMS Carlskrona*. This enabled the FHQ to communicate with the Operational Headquarters and the other ships in the mission, as well as with the other international partners in the region. After that, when France took on the task of providing the FHQ, a shared platform called Atalanta Classified Mission Network (ACFN) was developed, which enabled the sharing of non-classified information and improved the situational awareness. In a later rotation in the same mission in 2015, when the Swedish-led FHQ and contingent were placed aboard a Dutch command ship, NATO officers within the FHQ would ensure that the relevant information from NATO's communication system was transferred to the ACFN, which allowed the Swedish-led FHQ to get access to the operationally relevant information.<sup>35</sup>

During the Libya operation, support staff from the Swedish contingent gained access to the NATO communication system in the Italian part of the Sigonella naval air base to be able to receive orders and deliver reports. Even though this worked satisfactorily, the transport to another part of the base posed a security risk, was time consuming and could have posed a problem in a rapidly evolving situation. At the same time, the mission was a catalyst for the rapid instalment of NATO's tactical data link to the Swedish aircraft, which ensured that the pilots had access to the relevant tactical information. Air-to-air refuelling of the Swedish aircraft from NATO members also proved to function as intended, although there were some initial problems with different air fuel standards. All

in all, the evolved state of the Swedish Air Force's technical interoperability with NATO was showcased in Libya.<sup>36</sup>

These experiences from international missions demonstrate that technical workarounds are necessary for partners to operate effectively together in a NATO context. This would likely also apply to a crisis or conflict in Sweden's immediate neighbourhood. Based on the experience of the Afghan Mission Network that was used during the ISAF mission, NATO is developing a system called Federated Mission Networking (FMN). Such a system will provide an overall framework connecting national systems to enable the conduct of operations, sharing of information and improving situational awareness. In order to further integrate operations, the aim is to connect different sensors and effects. However, it remains to be solved whether and how NATO partners will get access to this system.<sup>37</sup>

#### *NATO-compatible procedures*

The adaptation of the Swedish Armed Forces to NATO procedures started within the Navy, in the 1990s, and followed in the Air Force, from the 2000s. Early on, the Army also gained experience in several NATO missions. Moreover, NATO procedures set the standard for EU missions and for most of the close partners, such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Germany, who operate together with Sweden in the UN operation in Mali. However, in the EU, the command chains are shorter, and the member states have a larger influence on the conduct of operations. The UN system is perceived as being much more bureaucratic, e.g., when it comes to logistics and medical support. Sweden has therefore opted not to rely on UN support for medical evacuations.<sup>38</sup>

The alignment with NATO procedures goes deepest in the Swedish Navy, where rules and regulations are based on NATO-compatible routines and vocabulary. Orders are given in English, but according to national formats. The same procedures are used in international missions and in the close bilateral cooperation with Finland,

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34 Hull Wiklund, Cecilia and Lackenbauer, Helene, *Insatsuppföljning Mali 04/05: En analys av Sveriges fjärde och femte förbandsbidrag till FN:s insats i Mali*, FOI-R--4487--SE, 2017, p. 35–36. Sensitivities regarding sharing of intelligence and raw data are most significant in the UN context, but also apply in a NATO or EU operation.

35 Respondents 1, 8 and 10; Harriman, David and Zetterlund, Kristina, *Bilateral Partnership on an Even Keel - The Integration of Swedish and Dutch Forces in EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta 2015*, FOI-R--4101--SE, 2015.

36 Respondents 7 and 9.

37 Respondent 6.

38 Respondents 2 and 8.

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which demonstrates a strong link between lessons from international missions and the cooperation with partners who are relevant for national defence.<sup>39</sup>

However, several respondents noted that NATO procedures are not based on the mission-oriented command practice that Sweden has traditionally employed. In the Swedish national context, the command system relies on commanders' becoming familiar with the chain of command and the expectations from higher commands. However, in international missions, there are frequent rotations of commanders and forces, which leads to more detailed and complex planning and orders.

The methods used in international missions are furthermore tailored towards the cooperation between a large number of partners, which makes them ill-suited for the national context.<sup>40</sup> According to one respondent, some aspects of a more detailed and centralised international command method have been transferred into the Swedish planning and command method (*Svensk Planerings- och Ledningsmetod, SPL*). This means that more details are now included in planning documents and orders, which were previously part of general regulations. Other respondents stressed that it is important to understand the differences between the international and national contexts and to, once again, promote methods better suited to national defence. For example, the Air Force has lately started to shift back to using more of the national methods.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, both the Armed Forces and the Swedish Ministry of Defence have been gaining valuable experience from the preparations undertaken even before a Swedish contribution to an international mission is made. At the political-strategic level, the Swedish NATO, EU and UN delegations facilitate contacts with the relevant planning officials in these organisations. At the military level, bilateral contacts with partner countries are also necessary to ease preparations, for example when setting up joint force packages or basing Swedish forces in another NATO country. The Swedish Armed Forces has placed liaison officers at

key headquarters in Belgium, the UK and Germany; these officers can facilitate contacts and provide early information on the planning of an operation.<sup>42</sup>

Once a decision has been made to participate in a mission, it is important to place and use liaison officers early on at all levels in the command structure to get access to information and planning documents. It may also be advisable to retain liaison officers in headquarters between rotations in order to ease the preparations necessary for the coming rotation. In addition, contributing nations are expected to place staff officers at all levels in the chain of command. While they are primarily tasked with supporting the international staff they serve, they can also facilitate contacts and ensure information-sharing.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Values and cultural dimension are key*

As mentioned previously, according to a majority of the respondents the most valuable lesson that international missions convey for improving interoperability relate to the human and cultural dimensions. Operating in an international context demonstrates both the commonalities and differences in how other armed forces operate. Showing that the Swedish methods and procedures work in an international context strengthens the morale of soldiers and enhances trust in the national system. Working together with partners also enhances cultural awareness and promotes personal relations. Most respondents stressed that achieving close cooperation and interoperability with partners is easier with those countries that share common values. However, before missions are underway it is equally important to prepare for them by getting to know each other and train together. In order to sustain a high level of interoperability, these personal contacts and experiences also need to be maintained over time.<sup>44</sup>

In some instances, Swedish staff have also noted that Swedish culture and values, the informal relationship between officers and soldiers and the mission-oriented command method differ from other countries. In an

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39 Respondent 8.

40 Respondents 1, 4, 5, 8.

41 Respondents 4, 5, 7.

42 Hagström Frisell, Eva and Ahl, Alexander, *Erfarenheter från den svenska flyginsatsen i Libyen*, FOI Memo H1057, 2012, p. 15–16, 20, 28 and respondent 3.

43 Tham Lindell and Weibull, *Sveriges militära bidrag till Operation Atalanta 2013*, s. 22; respondents 2, 3, 7, 8.

44 Respondents 2, 4, 6, 8, 10.



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international mission, it is important to identify these cultural differences early on and test the command system to understand how different nations interpret and solve given tasks.<sup>45</sup>

The respondents also emphasised that the challenges are not related to language as much as to culture and core values. Some respondents explicitly pointed out that in order to be able to operate effectively together the human dimension trumps the technical dimension. In general, however, they are viewed as intertwined.<sup>46</sup> The take-home message is that while technical problems are usually solved quickly, culture and values cannot be expected to change at all during the course of a mission. A key message from the respondents is that it is important to attempt to adapt to cultural differences early on, preferably at the planning stage of missions, and to continuously improve familiarity with partner countries and organisations through liaison officers. These lessons are most likely also applicable for building interoperability with partners in Sweden's immediate neighbourhood.

### **Variations between missions**

In addition to the overall observations on how international missions influence national defence, the analysis has inspired some initial thoughts on the variations between missions.

#### *Benefits over time*

It is clear that both the navy's first major international mission (EU NAVFOR Somalia, Operation Atalanta) and the air force's first in 50 years (OUP Libya) had profound learning effects for the Swedish Armed Forces. The missions in Somalia and Libya provided a test of the whole system in the navy and air force, including methods and procedures, support functions and logistics, albeit for a narrow span of tasks. The missions identified problems that are also relevant for national tasks, which in turn provided valuable lessons for developing national capabilities and support functions.

While the mission in Mali initially provided an opportunity to test the ISR concept previously developed during the later years of the Kosovo and Afghanistan missions, the repeated rotations of ground forces to Mali

rapidly put a strain on these specialised capabilities. After the first rotations, the responsibility to man the Swedish contingents shifted from the intelligence battalion to other parts of the armed forces, while still requiring support from specialised functions. This gradually started to affect the fine-tuned balance between international missions and preparing for national tasks. In this sense, the mission in Mali resembles other drawn-out contributions of mainly ground forces in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. It is clear that the trade-off between international and national tasks becomes more acute over time in missions with multiple rotations, where the capacity of the armed forces eventually culminates.

To some extent, the balance between benefits and trade-offs in international missions pertains to the different character of the contributions of the different branches of the armed forces. The navy, air force and special forces are normally engaged in shorter international missions. In these missions, the participating troops resemble national units, but with a larger share of full-time soldiers. The units often operate rather independently from others and the interoperability with partners mainly relates to command, control and communication. In the army, the missions normally last longer and involve the construction of camps and the building of local relationships. The Swedish contingents in army missions normally consist of soldiers, officers and supporting personnel combined from different parts of the armed forces, rather than existing national units, and the cooperation and ensuing interoperability with partners is more hands-on.

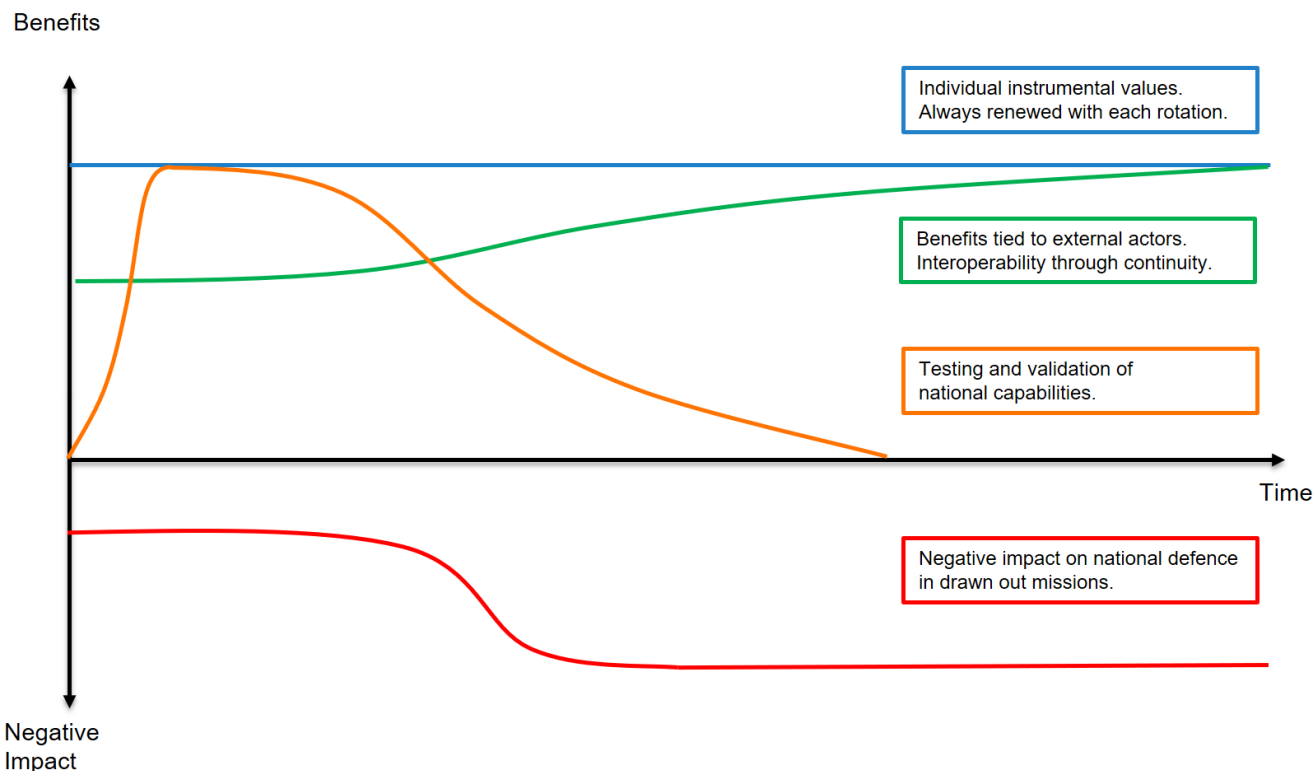
With regard to the temporal dimension, comparing short and drawn-out missions, the types of lessons and benefits vary. Stress-testing procedures and support systems, for instance, will result in a stepwise increase in the benefits from a given mission, where the challenge appears first. Simply put, it is natural that if a mission is the first of its kind, or that a certain capability or concept is being deployed for the first time, more lessons are learned.

Benefits linked to growing interoperability work differently. Interoperability is mostly achieved through continued collaboration, especially as concerns the human dimension of culture and values and establishing long-standing and active working relationships. As one

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<sup>45</sup> Respondents 8 and 10.

<sup>46</sup> Respondents 3, 4 and 10.



**Figure 1:** Schematic qualitative illustration of benefits and negative impacts emerging over time. Negative impacts on national defence are visualised as a more stepwise change at a point in time when larger challenges appear at the initiation of an additional new rotation, at which point the mission starts to become more of a strain on the armed forces as a whole.

respondent put it, “When regular talks with a partner went down due to the pandemic, it did influence how well the collaboration works”.<sup>47</sup> In sum, long-lasting relationships require continuous commitment over time.

Also, technical and procedural aspects of interoperability, in terms of communications systems and staff officers, are linked to long-standing relationships. For example, since Sweden is not a member of NATO, every mission has its workarounds to overcome the technical hurdles of integrating information-sharing systems with NATO, and respondents expressed that it is beneficial to exert continuous effort in maintaining technical interoperability in this way. However, such interoperability does not necessarily need to be tied to mission participation, but could also be maintained through regular exercises.

When it comes to learning effects for the individual, it does not really matter how many rotations a mission consists of, or with which partners. Almost all experiences are valuable experiences, and the next rotation offers a new set of lessons for new individuals. In other words, these instrumental values do not differ much between missions

and therefore do not provide substantial guidance on which mission to participate in. For the learning effects for units and the armed forces as a whole, a similar logic applies. The unique character of the international mission is important per se, and testing new capabilities can be valuable in many different missions, but benefits related to interoperability with partners are naturally tied to participating countries and types of missions.

Finally, trade-offs tend to be amplified over time. Shorter rotations, and overall shorter missions, are thus more beneficial for national defence than drawn-out missions. On the other hand, shorter rotations and missions may lead to other trade-offs when it comes to building knowledge and relationships in the mission area. Respondents highlighted the fact that larger contingents are fine (within certain limits), as such missions anyhow entail much of the same support effort logistically. The number of rotations, rather than the sheer numbers in a given rotation, is more straining on national resources and increases trade-offs. We summarise the initial findings on the varying dependency for these benefits over time in Figure 1.

<sup>47</sup> Respondent 10.

### *Benefits that depend on the leading organisation*

The benefits of international missions for national defence and interoperability clearly vary depending on who the lead organisation of the mission is. NATO missions have in general been characterised by access to higher-end capabilities and a higher operational tempo, which may make them more relevant for national defence. By adopting NATO procedures nationally and participating in a number of NATO missions since the Cold War, Sweden has learned how to prepare and operate in a NATO context. The scaling down of NATO missions in recent years may thus have negative effects on maintaining these lessons and interoperability in a NATO context. This may, in turn, affect the capability to operate together in a crisis in Sweden's immediate neighbourhood.

EU missions have also to a large extent relied on NATO standards. The shared communication platform developed during EUNAVFOR Somalia gave Sweden the possibility to access information on an equal footing with the other member states. However, EU missions have in recent years shifted towards training and capacity-building, which makes them less relevant for high-intensity warfighting and national tasks. UN missions, in turn, can certainly be large-scale and of high intensity, realising instrumental values at both individual level and for the Armed Forces as a whole, but the UN system is characterised by being civilian-led, more bureaucratic and with varying quality in the national contributions. Few of our respondents explicitly discussed the UN-led missions in terms of any instrumental values being tied to the UN as the lead, and it is natural that the UN missions are associated more closely to the 'Same Coin' or 'Foreign policy' ideal types identified in previous research on the nexus between international missions and national defence.<sup>48</sup> Consequently, during recent UN missions, Sweden has opted to cooperate closely with other European partners.

It is also clear that the perceived importance of partners in international missions is explained by a combination of the geographical proximity and relative capability of the actors involved. In general, respondents stressed that northern and western European partners share similar values and culture and apply NATO standards to a large extent, which facilitates cooperation that fosters interoperability. Furthermore, the major military actors, such as the US, UK and France are key to gaining access to advanced capabilities in operations. In the latest defence bill, Finland, Denmark, Norway, the US, UK and NATO are indicated as being Sweden's most important partners. The respondents also stressed that it is of higher value for

Sweden's national defence if Sweden engages with these priority partners in international missions. In addition to these priority partners, in recent missions Sweden has experienced close and rewarding cooperation with France, the Netherlands and Germany.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

This study demonstrates that the experience gained in international military missions during the past decade can provide operational benefits that are relevant for the armed forces in the current defence policy era, which gives the highest priority to national tasks. International missions provide a unique opportunity for learning and enhancing capabilities, both within the Swedish Armed Forces and together with partners. At the individual level, international missions develop soldiers' and officers' skills and build trust in national training, procedures and systems. At the level of the armed forces, international missions test national systems, including logistics and support functions, and provide an opportunity to develop and test specialised capabilities.

International missions also build interoperability and strengthen collaboration with partners by virtue of having operated together in an environment of conflict and showed that Sweden is a trust-worthy partner. Even though all dimensions of interoperability – technology, procedures and human resources – are important to be able to operate effectively together, lessons from international missions highlight the fact that common values and cultural understanding are key to establishing close working relationships. Technical problems and obtaining access to NATO communication systems have been solved pragmatically together with partners in missions and paved the way for further NATO integration, which could also be of relevance for operations in Sweden's immediate neighbourhood. However, even though the Swedish Armed Forces has adopted NATO-compatible procedures and gained experience from participating in several NATO missions, as a non-member, each new setting requires that some hurdles are overcome. Therefore, continuity is important for upholding the levels of interoperability gained through previous international missions. However, interoperability can also be maintained through regular exercises. In future research, it would be interesting to compare the interoperability gains Sweden receives from international missions with its gains from the national and international exercises that it participates in together with partners.

At the same time, the benefits for national defence are limited when it comes to the now expanding wartime

<sup>48</sup> Hellquist and Tidblad-Lundholm, *National Defence and International Military Missions*, p. 17–28.

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order of battle. As the conflict environment and the tasks in international missions are very different from those in the national context, it is not feasible to send complete national wartime units, geared for high-intensity warfare involving larger forces and a higher degree of risk-taking, to international missions. Instead, the practice of sending parts of units, or combined units, facilitates the spread of experience and lessons learned across the armed forces and reduces the negative consequences for national preparedness and tasks. However, given the limited resources, this trade-off or balancing act between different tasks needs to be taken into account in each decision that sends troops abroad.

Given that participation in international military missions is likely to remain an important part of Swedish security policy, alongside national defence, policymakers need to carefully consider why, what and with whom Sweden should contribute to international missions.

#### *Why international missions?*

The political goal of the mission should always remain of the highest priority. It is also essential to realise that the armed forces is just one instrument in a comprehensive approach that covers different policy areas. Having a clear political objective for each mission is of importance for the armed forces to be able to fulfil their tasks and for the motivation of individual soldiers. Earlier research has argued that international missions could facilitate recruitment of personnel, but it has proven to be difficult to confirm this conjecture.<sup>49</sup> To some extent, international missions will always be driven by developments in international security and national political priorities. However, the government and Armed Forces could try to design the Swedish contribution to an international mission in such a way that it increases the instrumental value and reduces trade-offs for the armed forces and national defence, for example by involving the commanders of national units in the planning process. The current priority given to national defence and the task of expanding the wartime order of battle may reduce the resources available for international missions, particularly staff officers. At the same time, interoperability needs to be maintained over

time, for example through liaison officers, exercises and contributions to international missions.

#### *What to contribute?*

International missions are important for all the branches of the armed forces as they create an opportunity to develop specialised capabilities and test the national system, including logistics and support. Focusing on the operational benefits for national defence, shorter rotations and/or shorter missions are advantageous as they spread lessons learned across larger parts of the organisation and reduce the negative consequences for national defence. At the same time, larger missions may constitute a more efficient use of resources than several smaller ones, as they lead to a more meaningful contribution, while requiring similar support functions as a smaller mission. Another way to ensure an efficient use of resources would be to cooperate with partners and set up combined units in missions, which would enable a smaller Swedish contribution and a focus on specialised capabilities.

#### *Whom to cooperate with?*

In order to build international collaborations relevant for national defence, the defence bill has prioritised the relationship with Sweden's Nordic partners and the major security providers in the Baltic Sea context – the US, the UK and NATO. Focusing on Sweden's geographical neighbourhood and long-standing partnerships in this region, coordinated operational planning and exercises with these partners may be more relevant to building interoperability than international missions are. However, current international missions give the armed forces an opportunity to build closer relationships with other countries, such as France, Germany and the Netherlands, as well as offering additional contact surfaces with the highest prioritised partners. Shared values and cultural understanding, as well as joint preparations, ease close cooperation and integration in the field. In this way, participation in international military missions not only reflects Sweden's engagement in pressing security crises, but also tangibly contributes to the current military doctrine and defence policy of building national security together with others. ■

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<sup>49</sup> FOI, *Det är på riktigt nu!*, s. 60–65.