

THE STRUGGLE FOR SWEDEN'S DEFENCE POLICY

Sweden is witnessing an intense dispute over the nation's defence policy. The supreme commander of the Swedish armed forces has warned that they would only be able to defend their country against an aggressor for one week. While the military had strongly realigned itself towards the requirements of foreign deployments, territorial defence is once more becoming an issue due to concerns about Russia's intentions. Critics doubt whether Sweden would be able to defend itself at all in case of a war. This has given rise to debates over collective defence and mutual assistance – though Sweden still adheres to its status of military non-alignment.



M. Carlsson / Försvarsmakten

During NATO's "Cold Response 2010" exercise, Norwegian tanks roll across the border into Sweden.

On 29 March 2013 at 2 a.m., as part of a military exercise, Russian long-range bombers and fighter jets in the Baltic unexpectedly began simulated attacks on Stockholm and military targets in southern Sweden. Instead of their usual route, which would have taken them from St. Petersburg via the Gulf of Finland and across the Baltic down to the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, the six aircraft stayed on course towards the island of Gotska Sandön, 40km north of the island of Gotland (see map). The Swedish air force was unable to react to the Russian provocation. Although a state of permanent readiness was theoretically in force, no Gripen jets were available to intercept the foreign aircraft heading towards Swedish airspace. NATO, on the other hand, ordered two

Danish fighters to take off from Lithuania. A few weeks later, when the incident became public, Swedish politicians lamented the lack of combat readiness in the armed forces.

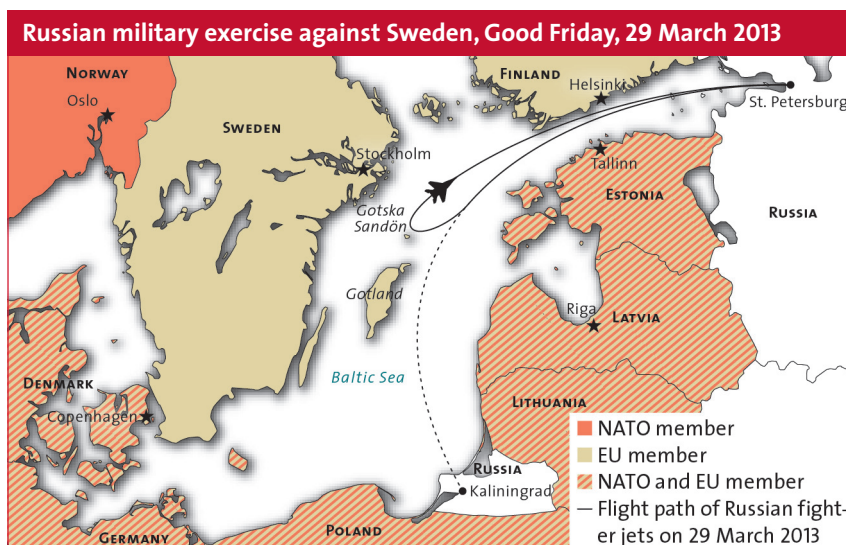
Since the resurgence of Russian great-power ambitions under President Vladimir Putin (cf. CSS Analysis No. 136 [□](#)), Sweden is taking its traditional territorial defence seriously once more. The Swedish government has openly acknowledged that the country would now be unable to defend itself against a military attack on its own. Sweden, an EU member, has incrementally moved away from its official non-aligned status in the past ten years. Since 2009, Sweden has relied on the EU and NATO providing assistance in case of a military

emergency, based on the so-called "assistance clause" in the EU's Lisbon Treaty (Article 42) and a unilateral statement of solidarity with its neighbour, NATO member Norway.

However, NATO has recently stated publicly that its assistance obligation only applies to member states – not to Sweden. This still leaves Sweden with the EU assistance clause, but in view of the current erosion in the EU's security and defence policy due to the financial crisis, this is cold comfort. For Sweden would rather rely on NATO than on the EU in the case of a war.

Cold War "neutrality"

After the Second World War, Sweden had the world's fourth-largest air force and was able to mobilise up to 850,000 troops during the Cold War. Tanks, fighter jets, and submarines developed by Sweden's own arms industry reinforced the credibility of the country's armed neutrality. Defence against all comers was the official strategy during the East-West conflict. The country's well-equipped mass army was to deter and, if necessary, repel enemies from all points of the compass. Neutrality was regarded as part of the national identity. Strong territorial defence was complemented by an active neutral foreign policy aimed at reducing tension between the two military blocs of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. As part of the UN, the country was also engaged militarily far from home. From 1948 to 1991, Sweden supplied 12 per cent of all UN peacekeeping troops.



both NATO and the EU, stabilizing Sweden’s geopolitical environment.

“Enemy from the East”

However, in recent years, political and military circles in Sweden have increasingly criticised the alignment of the armed forces towards international operations as lopsided. After the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, a gentle change of course in defence policy was introduced. Concerns also arose in Sweden over an increase of Russian military operations in the Nordic-Baltic region, such as the resumption of strategic bomber patrols over the Arctic, cyber-attacks against Estonia (though Russia’s alleged authorship of these attacks was never proven), military operations using scenarios directed against the Baltic, and ambitions in the resource-rich Arctic. Sweden was also taken aback by the increasing Russian defence budget and the modernisation of the Russian armed forces. The matter of whether Sweden was being defended at the Hindu Kush (against al-Qaida) or on the Baltic island of Gotland (against Russia) became a matter of growing urgency. The old adage of the “enemy from the East” gained renewed currency. In March 2009, a Swedish white paper for the first time assessed the protection of Sweden’s territorial integrity as being of equal importance as participation in global crisis management operations.

Beginning in 1948, the official policy of neutrality was complemented by secret agreements with the US and the UK on military cooperation with NATO in the case of a Soviet attack on Sweden. These preparations for war in coordination with NATO were highly classified during the Cold War and were only discussed in public after its end. Today, it is certain that from 1948 onwards, Sweden undertook concrete preparations for cooperating with NATO. Military runways were extended to be able to accommodate NATO bombers; a dedicated telex line from Sweden to the NATO air force command in Wiesbaden, Germany was established; plans were elaborated for joint airspace monitoring together with NATO members Norway and Denmark; and in case of a war, high-ranking Swedish officials were to be embedded in NATO command staffs.

Sweden, the EU, and NATO

With the end of the Cold War, Sweden’s strategic calculation changed fundamentally. The danger of a direct attack on Sweden was strongly diminished. The country’s Russia-centred foreign policy was now realigned more globally. In 1995, Sweden joined the EU for economic reasons. In doing so, the country became part of a political security community. After the Kosovo war of 1999, the EU states reaffirmed their determination to become a strategic actor in security policy and to build a capability for joint military response in crisis situations. Sweden reduced its neutrality to the core of military non-aligned status. From 2003 onwards, Sweden participated actively in EU overseas military missions in Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Georgia.

Sweden supplied 1,500 troops to the EU Rapid Reaction Force and 1,100 troops to the Nordic Battlegroup. Sweden was able to internationalise its security policy because the EU specialised in overseas crisis management and not on collective defence with mutual security guarantees, which at the time was still a delicate and sensitive topic for Sweden.

Since 1994, Sweden has also been an active member of the NATO initiative “Partnership for Peace” (PfP). In NATO exercises and overseas operations from Kosovo to the Hindu Kush, the Swedish armed forces have gained experience operating together with other armies. In doing so, Sweden gained the respect of the international community and is regularly praised by the US and NATO for the effective transformation of its armed forces and its modern professional army. In the Libyan war of 2011, the Swedish Air Force was responsible for about 25 per cent of NATO’s airborne surveillance.

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The Swedish armed forces shifted the focus of their operations away from national defence towards crisis management operations between 1995 and 2009. Defence installations were shut down, based closed, and units amalgamated. These reforms were completed in 2010 with the abolition of conscription and a downsizing of the army to 50,000 soldiers. While during the Cold War, the military budget accounted for 3.1 per cent of GDP, that share has declined to 1.2 per cent today. Sweden benefited from the peace dividend when the former Warsaw Pact countries of Central Europe and the Baltic states joined

In December 2012, Sverker Göransson, the supreme commander of the Swedish armed forces, added fuel to the fire when

he stated in an interview that, should the country be attacked, his army would only be able to defend it for one week. After that point,

Sweden would have to rely on help from other countries. His alarmist statement was taken up gratefully by the co-governing parties – the Liberals, the Christian Democrats, and the Centre Party. They demanded an increase of the military budget and an increased emphasis on territorial defence. A study by the Swedish *Royal Academy of War Sciences* later confirmed shortcomings in defence capabilities: The army lacked mid-range air and missile defence systems, the air force needed long-range air-to-ground missiles, and the navy required air defence systems.

The conservative government attempted to assuage the heated tempers. Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt emphasised

that no Russian attack on Sweden was to be expected, and that his government had to take not just defence policy, but also education and health policy into account. Foreign Minister Carl Bildt added that while Russia was currently upgrading its armaments and modernising its armed forces, there was no comparison to the Soviet era. The current political fault lines in Sweden are remarkable: The pacifist Social Democrats, currently in the opposition, are much more vociferous in their advocacy of strong defence than the traditionally pro-military conservatives, who have been the leading party in government since 2006.

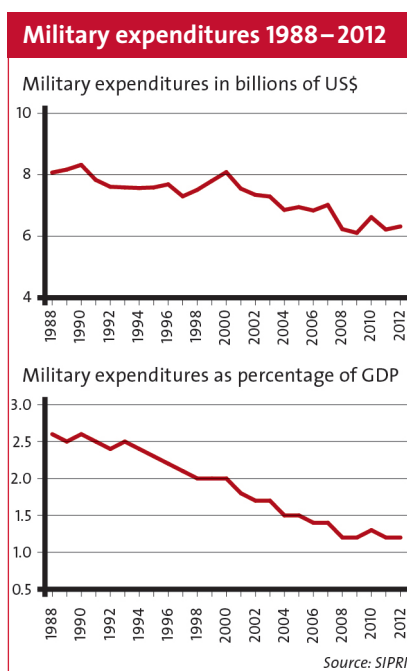
The current debate in Sweden is taking place against the background of an overall strategic macro-situation that has been undergoing transformation in the past five years. In Europe, the financial and debt crisis since 2007 has also perceptibly slowed down the dynamics of EU security and defence policy. As a result of the crisis, governments of EU member states are trying to save as much as possible on military expenditures. At the same time, the US is reducing its military presence in Europe and increasingly turning its attention towards the Pacific. They expect the Europeans to take on a greater share of the burden within NATO. Globally, after a decade of war in Afghanistan, NATO is changing from an alliance of worldwide military intervention into a regional defence alliance, with Russia becoming an increasingly important factor. As a result, Sweden's strategic focus is also shifting towards the Baltic and its more proximate surroundings.

Who will help Sweden?

At the end of May 2013, a cross-party parliamentary defence commission issued a statement on the controversy over defence policy. In a 200-page report, it recommended that the international cooperation strategy of the past 20 years be upheld and even expanded. The report states unambiguously: "Sweden is not alone. Security is achieved through solidarity." The commission thus clearly rejected the return to autonomous national defence as demanded by individual military officers and politicians.

The commission praised Sweden's broad range of security policy options that from 1994 onwards had replaced secret military cooperation with NATO during the Cold War. First of all, the report demanded that

Collective defence is the only sensible option against a superior enemy for a small country.



UN peace support operations be increased. Secondly, it advocated a strengthening of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Third, it called for an expansion of the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) with Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Iceland, which had been institutionalised in 2009. In 2014, Sweden and Finland are to assist in monitoring Iceland's airspace for four months to relieve NATO member Norway. Since 2009, the Scandinavians have been trying to achieve cost-efficiency in the arms sector through NORDEF) as well. However, for Norway and Denmark – and ultimately also for Sweden – having the US on board in NATO is more important than Nordic cooperation. Fourth, cooperation with NATO is to be intensified, especially in the area of regional military exercises. In 2013, the issue of NATO accession was once again broached by the Liberals, the fourth-largest party in parliament. While 50 per cent of Swedes rejected NATO membership in 2011, that number had declined to just 32 per cent by the beginning of 2013, with 29 per cent in favour and more than one third of respondents undecided.

Solidarity, not neutrality

In the matter of whether Sweden was able at all to defend itself against a Russian invasion, Defence Minister Karin Enström emphasised that the country could rely on its EU partners and Norway in case of an emergency. However, during a visit to

EU Assistance Clause (Art. 42)

One of the most important novel features of the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force on 1 December 2009, is a specific assistance clause patterned on Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty. Article 42 (7) of the Lisbon Treaty states: "If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. This shall not prejudice the specific character of the security and defence policy of certain Member States." The phrase "specific character" refers to the military non-aligned status of EU states such as Sweden, Finland, or Austria.

Sweden at the end of 2012, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made clear that the guarantee of assistance in case of a military attack under Article V only applied to NATO members, not to countries outside of the alliance. Norwegian Defence Minister Anne-Grete Strøm-Erichsen also declared in February 2013 that Norway had neither the capability nor the intention to assist Sweden in case of an attack.

These unmistakable statements constituted severe setbacks for the Swedish "policy of solidarity". The country had tried during the past decade to compensate for the deficiencies of its non-aligned policy through statements of solidarity and concrete contributions. In a unilateral statement of solidarity in a white paper of 2009, Sweden promised to provide assistance to any EU partner as well as Norway or Iceland in the case of military attack. In return, Stockholm expected the EU as well as Norway and Iceland (i.e., NATO) to also support Sweden in case of an attack.

The origins of Sweden's policy of solidarity are to be found in the terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004. At the time, the EU responded with a statement affirming solidarity among members in case of terrorist attacks or natural disasters. Stockholm initially regarded this as a political statement. In 2007, Sweden extended its applicability to Norway and Iceland. In the following year, the reference to terrorism was omitted; the defence policy report for 2008 now stated: "Sweden may contribute military assistance in case of disasters or conflict situations." In the same year, the Russian invasion in Georgia reinforced Sweden's desire for a military guarantee in case of war. After the Swedish parliament

had ratified the Lisbon Treaty including its new mutual assistance clause (Art. 42) in November 2008 (cf. info box), the government in Stockholm declared in March 2009 that under the new policy of solidarity, in practical terms, the Swedish armed forces had to be able both to receive and extend military assistance.

Collective defence in practice

Today, Sweden openly discusses its reliance on foreign military assistance in case of national defence. In case of war, the country would rely on the military solidarity of its EU partners and hope for support from Norway and NATO. From Stockholm's point of view, collective defence is the only sensible option against a superior enemy for a small country, which is why Sweden entered into secret agreement with NATO from as early as 1948 onwards. However, today, unlike during the Cold War, there are no concrete preparations for activating the EU assistance clause. According to military experts, Sweden would be unable to integrate military assistance from abroad even if such aid were offered, since military cooperation in recent years has only encompassed overseas operations, not collective defence of Sweden's national territory.

In this context, it is interesting to note Sweden's behaviour during a NATO Crisis Management Exercise in Norway in autumn of 2011: This was the first manoeuvre in ten years to practice collective defence under Article V. To everybody's great surprise, when NATO ran out of defence forces during the exercise, Sweden stepped in and offered Norway direct assistance in the form of warships and 48 Gripen fighters. The Swedish contribution was placed under NATO command. This was an unprecedented step: For the first time, a non-NATO member offered operational military assistance to the alliance in an Article V situation – thus blurring the established boundaries between a NATO member state and a PfP partner in a *casus foederis*.

The current debate over defence policy in Sweden illustrates the urgency of an open debate concerning the advantages and disadvantages of collective defence, particularly against the background of increasing instability in the Nordic-Baltic region. The admission of interdependency and reliance on foreign assistance in wartime marks a renunciation of the neutrality myth in public discourse. How-

ever, Sweden's policy of solidarity has lost credibility in recent months. Without NATO membership, Sweden cannot be certain of the alliance's military support in wartime – however, NATO membership is a far distant prospect. For the time being, though, the EU's mutual assistance clause is a paper tiger, since CSDP is geared towards crisis management, not collective defence. The recently published defence report for 2013 constitutes an important basis for the next Swedish white paper in 2015 and thus for Sweden's defence policy from 2015 to 2018. The perception of Russian intentions and the question of credible national defence or reliable collective defence will

then once more be crucial issues of security policy debates in Sweden.

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