

## From Self-Sufficiency to Solidarity: The Transformation of Sweden's Defence and Security Policies

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In the minds of many, neutrality is as ingrained a feature of Sweden as are long winters, Ingmar Bergman, and the welfare state. As with many other stereotypes, the mental template lives on, despite the facts having changed. In fact, Sweden's Cold War 'policy of neutrality' was already officially dropped in 1992, in favour of 'military non-alignment'. In 2002 all the main parties – except the Liberals, which wanted to join NATO – agreed on a new formula, which said that military non-alignment had served us well, but that for the future we should seek our security in cooperation with others. In 2007 and 2008 this process was taken one step further, when a declaration of solidarity was issued, stating that Sweden would not be passive should another EU member or Nordic state be threatened or attacked, and that we expected others to act similarly should Sweden be under threat. Importantly, it was added that this meant that Sweden must be able to give and receive military assistance.

On the heels of these major changes in security policy doctrine has come an ongoing transformation of the armed forces, from a cumbersome anti-invasion force based on conscription, to a nimble all-volunteer force ready for expeditionary operations. Reforms in this direction have been under way for some fifteen years, but half-heartedly. It is only in the last three to four years that the political and military authorities have gathered the courage to make a clean cut with the old, and to draft the radical defence reform bill, which was passed by Parliament in 2009.

Why these changes? Or, put differently, why did it take Sweden twenty years to adapt its security and defence policies to the fact that the Cold War had

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ended?

## 1. The Deep Roots of Neutrality

To answer these questions we must look back in time a bit. For many, both in Sweden and abroad, the perception of ‘neutral Sweden’ is heavily influenced by the image projected during the second half of the Cold War, when Olof Palme was a leading figure in Swedish politics. Official policy then presented a combination of three major tenets:

- a doctrine of “non-alignment in peacetime, aiming for neutrality in case of war”, which attached great importance to maintaining the credibility of said policy in foreign eyes. Neither East nor West should nourish fears or hopes of Sweden taking sides in a future conflict, without first being attacked herself. This policy was made increasingly doctrinaire as the years passed, blocking most forms of overt military cooperation. It also fostered a mind-set of self reliance concerning national security.
- a rather large conventional military defence, built on conscription and a strong domestic defence industry. That both industry and the armed forces depended on the West for technologies and for back-stop support was not talked about.
- an assertive and morally charged stance on international security issues and development affairs, with Sweden acting as the outspoken champion of the down-trodden and the underprivileged.

However, Sweden’s neutrality predates the radical 1970s. It has its roots in *Realpolitik*, and they run back to the final years of the Napoleonic wars. In 1809, Sweden lost Finland – which had been an integral part of the realm for 600 years – to Russia. After this, the king was deposed and one of Napoleon’s marshals was chosen as crown-prince, in the hope that he would align Sweden with Napoleon and lead a reconquest of Finland.

But Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte saw that Napoleon’s star was waning, and also realised that it lay beyond Sweden’s means to successfully rival Russia for dominance of the Baltic basin. Under the so-called ‘Policy of 1812’, Sweden let Russia know that it had reconciled itself to the loss of Finland and would avoid quarrels with Russia in the future, in the hope of being left in peace.

Arguably, the Policy of 1812 provided the main template for Sweden's security policy for almost two centuries. This meant putting one's own security above any striving for influence, above any idealism, and above any notions of solidarity with neighbours or like-minded or suppressed nations.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Security Policy during the First Half of the Cold War

Directly after the Second World War, the concept of neutrality seemed somewhat tainted, both in Sweden and abroad. However, when dark clouds again gathered in the late 1940s, Sweden decided not to join the Atlantic Alliance, but resorted to its default option of staying on the side-lines in the hope of being left in peace.

Voices in favour of alignment with the West were partly contained by the 'Finland argument', i.e. that Swedish alignment with the West would trigger the Soviet Union to tighten its grip on Finland. Another factor which helped contain pressures to side with the West was the government's support for strong national defences. The outbreak of the Korean War triggered a massive Swedish rearmament programme, not least concerning the air force.

Finally, senior policy dissidents in the military, in the diplomatic service, and in the non-communist opposition were aware of the fact that – like a medieval castle – the fortress of neutrality had a secret passage to the outside. The government had secretly authorised the armed forces to covertly prepare for military cooperation with Norway, Denmark, and the Western great powers, in case Sweden came under threat from the East.

Thus, Sweden's defences were construed to hold out until help could arrive, and steps were taken and contacts made to facilitate the reception of such help, not least in the form of strategic bombing of Soviet bases and ports, and forward-basing of allied fighter-bombers armed with nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup>

During the first decade of the Cold War, Swedish declaratory doctrine on

<sup>2</sup> See *Sverige i Fred – Statsmannakonst eller opportunism? En antologi om 1812 års politik*. Tapani Souminen (ed.) (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2002); Michael af Malmberg, *Neutrality and state-building in Sweden* (Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 165–166, 201–202.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Dalsjö, *Life- Line Lost: The rise and fall of 'neutral' Sweden's secret reserve option of wartime help from the West*. (Stockholm: Santérus Academic Press, 2006), pp. 156, 163–166, 175–179. My account of war games draws on Johan Gribbe, *En inre angelägenhet för fritt tankeutbyte: Synen på västsamverkan i Försvarshögskolans krigsspel 1952–1979*, TRITA-HST Working paper 2003/1 (Stockholm: KTH, 2003).

security policy was rather pragmatic and clearly based on what has been called small-state Realism. The policy was openly self-serving and the government scorned any notions of ideals having an influence on policy. Östen Undén, the very influential foreign minister from 1946 to 1962, put quotation marks around the words human rights, declared solidarity a defunct concept, and said that Sweden's policy lay "beyond good and evil".<sup>4</sup>

A few years after Undén's departure from the ministry of foreign affairs, Olof Palme introduced morally based activism into Swedish foreign policy, starting with condemnation of US warfare in Vietnam. A key prerequisite for this step was decoupling the Vietnam War from the East-West conflict, and redefining it as a North-South conflict. On East-West matters Undén's policy of reticence still held sway, and concerning criticism of the USSR it held sway till the end of the Cold War, reflecting the Policy of 1812. But on North-South matters, Sweden now felt free to speak out.

Neutrality policy was thus imbued with a sense of moral goodness and superiority it did not have before, and the feel-good effect was very appealing to both the public and the politicians. Neutrality soon became something of a national meta-ideology, and it blended with modernity and the welfare state to become part of the national identity. To be Swedish was to be neutral, to be neutral was to be good, thus it was good to be a Swede.

### **3. The Armed Forces and Total Defence**

Although Sweden escaped the ravages of the Second World War, the experience of being under threat and vulnerable had fostered solid support for strong defences among all the democratic parties (i.e. all but the Communists). Any notions of a peace dividend were shattered by the Prague coup, the Berlin blockade and the Korean War. Together with a booming export-driven economy, this allowed substantial increases in defence spending, leading to strong and large armed forces, at least by our standards.

Around 1960, the Swedish air force was arguably the world's fourth in size, and large investments were made in bases and in a state-of-the-art surveillance and ground control systems. The navy had many and modern ships, although it

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<sup>4</sup> Dalsjö, *Life-Line Lost*, pp. 89-91.

was forced to forego its cruisers, and later the destroyers too. An elaborate system of coastal defences was blasted into the rock. The fact that about 80% of young men did their national service, and that about 10% of the population were to be mobilised into the armed forces in case of war, provided the manpower for a large army, with up to 36 brigades and hundreds of territorial units. However, so much manpower meant that spending for equipment per soldier was rather low, with the bulk of the army being straight-leg infantry riding on bicycles, and only a few mechanised units.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, these large forces would only be available after mobilisation. In contrast to Germany, or the Soviet Union, Sweden did not use its conscripts to create standing units, which could be reinforced by reservists. Instead, the peacetime army was mainly an establishment for training conscripts and forming them into units. Once trained, the conscripts became reservists and were sent home, but with a mobilisation order in their pocket. The reservists were organised into pre-formed units, and the units' equipment were stored in unit-sets at thousands of different locations. This was supposed to allow mobilisation to take place even during an enemy attack. While this system allowed for a large army in relation to the size of the population, it also meant that short-term readiness was low, and that Sweden was vulnerable to being attacked before it had mobilised. It was hoped that good intelligence and wise statesmanship would make up for this weakness, by ordering mobilisation at an early stage. If that failed, the air force and the navy were to buy time for the army to mobilise.

From the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, Sweden's political and military leaders entertained plans for domestic production of nuclear weapons. Though Western support with nuclear strikes against an aggressor attacking Sweden was expected, many felt that Sweden would be more secure with nuclear weapons of its own. Without assured access to nuclear weapons, and facing a nuclear-armed enemy, it was thought that Sweden's strong conventional defences would be at a disadvantage. Plans for a Swedish "A-bomb" initially had strong support among the military and large parts of the political spectrum. But the push for the A-bomb engendered resistance among intellectuals and within the Social Democratic Party, which was split on the issue. Preparatory steps for the construction and production of nuclear weapons were taken, but as both political

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<sup>5</sup> They were formally called "armoured", but in an international context, "mechanised" is more fitting.

resistance and the costs of the project grew, it gradually lost support during the early 1960s. US efforts to discourage nuclear proliferation played a part too. This included providing Sweden with light-water reactor technology, and uranium fuel, at a competitive price, thus undercutting the national program based on plutonium production by heavy-water reactors using natural uranium. Possibly, US counter-proliferation efforts also included telling the Swedes that they were covered by the US nuclear umbrella. When the Swedish state secretary for defence gave the “burial speech” for the nuclear weapons program, he cited the fact that we were already covered by the nuclear umbrella as one of the reasons why Sweden could forego having its own nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup>

Sweden’s defences during the Cold War did not only consist of the armed forces. “Total War Requires a Total Defence” ran the slogan at the time. Besides the armed forces the Total Defence included Civil Defence, Economic Defence and Psychological Defence. Much effort and resources were spent on preparing the whole society for war. All able-bodied citizens between 16 and 65 years of age not serving in the military were liable for compulsory duty in work details. Apartment buildings had to have air raid shelters and display a poster locating evacuation routes, and where strategic commodities, food and fuel were stored; and industries, hospitals and railways etc. were also prepared for war. Together with Switzerland, Sweden was arguably the most militarised of Western democracies.

#### **4. The Political Tide Turns**

For the Swedish armed forces, the years up to the late 1960s were the “golden years”. In the late 1960s three things happened, which changed matters considerably. The first was the political winds from the left which were blowing all across the West, but were particularly problematic in Sweden, where the Social Democratic Party had held power since 1932. With an electoral challenge on their left flank, they had to move leftwards politically in order not to lose votes, and thus their hold on power. The second factor was that the generation of leading politicians which had been in positions of responsibility during the Second World War were retiring, and were being replaced by much younger

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<sup>6</sup> Stefan Jonter, *Sweden and the Bomb: The Swedish Plans to Acquire Nuclear Weapons 1945-1972*, SKI Report 01:33, September 2001; *Dalsjö, Life-Line Lost*, pp. 85-87.

men and women, with a world-view framed by the 1960s. The third factor was that the Swedish economic model, which had delivered spectacular growth for a hundred years, slowed and ground to a halt. Growth, which could be turned into both rising wages and social reforms, was replaced by stagflation which would leave Sweden in economic and political limbo for the coming twenty years. But popular and political expectations of continued reforms and rising living-standards did not wane. Part of the solution became to take money from the defence budget to pay for social reforms, and the onset of international détente was used to legitimise this.

Thus, the consensus between the democratic parties on a strong defence and on annual increases in the defence budget to pay for ever more expensive equipment broke up in the late 1960s. Instead, the Social Democrats agreed with the Communist Party on downgrading the importance of defence, and allowed budgets to remain flat. As the cost of personnel and equipment rose, flat budgets meant that the buying power of the armed forces was gradually eroded.

Faced with this very serious problem, the different branches of service chose different paths. The navy and the air force chose to cut quantity in order to preserve quality (in the case of the air force, keeping the domestic aircraft industry occupied may have played a role too). But the army took the portentous decision to accept sub-standard quality in order to preserve its order of battle. At a time when the rest of the industrialised world was mechanising its infantry, the Swedish army was considering whether it could afford to motorise its brigades with unprotected trucks. A decision was taken to modernise half of the infantry brigades to the lowest acceptable technical level (trucks, but no armour protection) and leave the rest of the brigades and the many territorial units as they were (on bicycles, pulled by agricultural tractors). This was done in the vain hope that a crisis would come, which would cause politicians to spend more for defence, allowing the modernisation of the remainder of the brigades.

But when international tension returned in the late 1970s, and Soviet submarine intrusions became a problem in the early 1980s, defence spending rose only marginally, and then mainly to pay for some additional anti-submarine warfare gear. Moreover, a decision was taken in 1982 to develop a new fighter aircraft, the Gripen, without providing sufficient extra funding for this. From an operational perspective, the decision to develop a new fighter as it's predecessor

the Viggen was just entering service, seems odd.<sup>7</sup> Industrial considerations probably played a major role in this.

The armed forces thus found themselves in a financial crunch, with very little room for the renewal of equipment, except for new fighters for the air force and a few ships for the navy. The situation was particularly bad for the army. Moreover, refresher-exercises for reservists were often cancelled when funding ran short. The leadership of the army still refused to cut the number of units in order to fund modernisation, which a minority within the service advocated. Instead, they started a war between the service branches, trying to curb the new fighter program in order to free up funds for the army, but to no avail.

## 5. After the Cold War

The fall of the Berlin Wall took most Swedish government officials by surprise, and they reacted with bewilderment rather than with elation. This applied not only to the political side, but also to the military. Many refused to accept that the end of the world as they knew it had come, and that the neutrality policy had become both obsolete and irrelevant.

The onset of a major domestic economic crisis focussed attention elsewhere, and in a footnote to an emergency economic bill to Parliament, the Social Democratic government declared its intention to join the European Community, a step hitherto considered impossible on the grounds of maintaining the credibility of neutrality.

The prospect of Sweden joining what was becoming the European Union made a reformulation of security policy necessary. In 1992, the new non-socialist government led by Carl Bildt, got the major parties to agree to a new formula, replacing the policy of neutrality with *military non-alignment*, which gave Sweden the *option* of neutrality in case of war *in its vicinity* (emphasis added). The latter part of the formula represented the remnants of the Policy of 1812, with its striving to avoid a conflict with Russia.

During the 1990s Sweden was slowly sucked into the orbits of the EU and NATO. In 1993, Sweden sent a mechanised battalion to Bosnia, in part to prove

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<sup>7</sup> The strike version of the Viggen (A 37) first entered service in 1972, the fighter version (JA 37) in 1980, with the last JA 37 being delivered in 1990. The JA 37 was essentially contemporary with the F-16, which is not only still in service, but also still in production (for export).



its credentials as a prospective member of the EU. In 1994, Sweden joined NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP), and in 1995 became a full member of the EU. The same year, Sweden placed its troops in Bosnia under NATO's command. NATO's role in ending the gruesome war in Bosnia, which the UN had failed to do, helped legitimise military cooperation with NATO.

Still, by the mid-1990s large parts of the Swedish establishment and public opinion were yet enamoured of the old policy and the paradigm of neutrality, and resisted moves for closer cooperation on security within the EU and with NATO.

The Gulf War of 1990/1991, as well as operations in the Balkans, had exposed how obsolete the Swedish armed forces' equipment was, particularly the army's. A program of modernisation and mechanisation was started by the Bildt-government. Leopard 2 tanks were bought from Germany, new AIFV's (CV 90) were ordered from the domestic supplier Hägglunds, and used APC's were bought from ex-East German stores. The new government had intended to raise the defence budget, but the advent of a fiscal crisis put a stop to that. As defence budgets stayed flat in nominal terms, modernisation had to lead to a reduction in the number of units. Such moves were resisted by parts of the officer corps, which preferred a large force structure – even if hollow – and they still clung to the perception of a Soviet /Russian threat to support their case.

Thus there was an odd 'conservative coalition' in security and defence policy, consisting of politicians that clung to the neutrality policy, and officers that clung to the old national tasks and the old threat. Universal conscription – which almost no one dared to question – and concerns for the domestic defence industry, were also factors that inhibited reform.

## **6. The Seeds of Internationalisation**

During the 1990s, six factors were at work slowly pushing Swedish security and defence policies in a more international direction, although this would only bear fruit in its totality after the turn of the century.

The first was the mechanisation and modernisation of the army, which put Sweden's armed forces more on par with other armies in the developed world. The Gulf War of 1990/1991 had shown the face of modern warfare, including precision-guided weapons, night-vision devices and battle management systems,

as well as the vulnerability of unprotected ground units. The carnage along the ‘Road of Death’ from Kuwait City to Basra stood out as a warning. Sweden’s assessment of what armoured forces could do was based on the performance of its own obsolete Centurion tanks. When trials with modern tanks were held, they showed that tanks could get through terrain previously thought impassable. And dual free-play exercises between armour and infantry led to a mechanised battalion routing an infantry brigade in wooded terrain. Suddenly, the whole concept for the land-defence of Sweden collapsed. Modernisation and mechanisation were the only ways forward. And once the infantry became used to riding under the protection of armour, there was no way of getting them back up on trucks or bicycles.

The second factor was the re-establishment of the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This was a great boon to Sweden’s national interests and national security, but it took a while before the government apparatus dared to accept this, and dared to act on it. Sweden played a key role early on in helping to secure the independence of the Baltics and the withdrawal of Russian troops, working in close concert with the US. But even the Bildt government did not dare to provide arms to the Balts until all Russian troops had been withdrawn.<sup>8</sup>

After the Russian withdrawal, Sweden expanded an existing program of “sovereignty support” to include also military assistance with surplus equipment and with training, eventually providing three infantry brigades’ worth of equipment.

In parallel, there was an international debate on the future security status of the Baltic states. The Balts wanted to join NATO, but many saw this as unrealistic. Some argued that these states could not be defended, others that NATO membership would provoke the Russians.<sup>9</sup> Some even suggested that the Scandinavians, rather than NATO, should be the guarantors of the Balts’ security. The Swedish government then gradually realised that the best solution, both for the Balts and for Sweden, was for NATO to underwrite the Balts’ security.

To those involved in Sweden’s Baltic policies, this demonstrated how Sweden’s interests and security were interlinked with those of its neighbours.

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<sup>8</sup> Lars Peter Fredén, *Återkomst: Svensk säkerhetspolitik och de baltiska ländernas första år i självständighet 1991-1994* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Dalsjö, “Are the Baltics Defensible?: On the Utility of and Prospects for a Capability for Self-Defence.”, *RUSIJOURNAL*, vol. 143, no. 4, August 1998, p. 40-44.

Security could no longer be seen, or secured, in purely national terms.

The third factor was the evolution of the nature of international peace operations, which changed with the end of the Cold War. Operations in the Balkans were dangerous, demanding and attention-getting, and Sweden took part not only for altruistic reasons, but also to protect national interests, broadly defined. If wars of aggression and concentration camps were *de facto* accepted in Europe of the 1990s, where might that take us? So Sweden discovered that it was in fact a stake-holder in the European security order, together with others, and that the problems had to be tackled together with others as well.

Moreover, the more intense and demanding nature of operations meant that they received greater public and political attention, and the need for preparations and for cooperation and integration with the armed forces of other states grew.

This dovetailed very well with the fourth factor, which was Sweden's cooperation with NATO through Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Partnership's Planning and Review Process (PARP). NATO's command of operations in the Balkans (from late 1995 on) helped legitimize this cooperation and the push for interoperability, which by its own logic snowballed until the Swedish armed forces had made the transition to using NATO's standards and procedures, rather than their own.

The fifth factor was Sweden's EU-membership. Swedes were initially very reluctant Europeans, but slowly accepted the fact that they were members of a Union, and that results-oriented negotiations in Brussels might in the end be more rewarding than grandstanding at rallies at home or in the UN.

The EU's Security and Defence Policy and its adoption of the Petersberg tasks – originally a Swedish-Finnish ruse to stave off calls for a European Army – grew with time into something more substantial, which was embraced by Sweden. Sweden has so far contributed to all military ESDP-operations, and provided the core of a high-class battle-group in 2008 and in 2011. The 2008 battle-group became the focus of attention for the armed forces, and a vehicle for their transformation.

Finally, the sixth factor, albeit less important than the other five, was the revelations that started in the early 1990s of Sweden's covert military ties to the West during the Cold War. An official commission revealed that preparations for wartime cooperation with the West, and for the reception of help, had indeed been undertaken, with the government's permission. Moreover, the commission

found proof of the US having decided to come to Sweden's assistance, should she be attacked. The commission's findings, which were later followed-up by researchers and journalists, helped puncture the cherished myth of pristine neutrality, unsoiled by contacts with the West, and of a Sweden that took care of its own security.<sup>10</sup>

While the impact of these revelations was significant, they still could not budge those segments of the population and the intelligentsia, which firmly believed in the old paradigm of neutrality, no matter what. That many of these were to be found on the political left circumscribed the freedom of manoeuvre of the Social Democrats, which remained the largest party. And as the Conservatives think that Sweden can only be brought into NATO if the Social Democrats are aboard, the issue has remained off the agenda.

## 7. The End of the National Road

Around the turn of the millennium, Sweden's politicians decided that there was no threat of an invasion in the next ten years. The armed forces finally accepted that the Russian threat had gone and that their focus should be on international peace-support operations. A period of drastic cuts in force structure of both war-time units and peace-time bases started. At the same time, American defence consultants convinced some leading Swedish generals that this was a good time to take a "strategic time-out". This entailed abandoning capabilities in the near term in favour of drafting a high-tech defence for the future, based on the concepts of a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and Network-Centric Warfare (NCW). Accordingly, the armed forces disbanded their mobilisation system without replacement, which meant that it might take three years to make a battalion ready for combat, and spent large sums on high-tech experiments. Despite supposedly being the focus, international operations continued to be handled by units set up ad hoc, drawing on previously trained reservists, as had been the case since the 1950s. The training of conscripts – which for many decades had been the core activity of the army – went on. But as force structure had shrunk, only about 15% of young men served, so conscription was no longer

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<sup>10</sup> *Had there been a war ... Preparations for the reception of military assistance 1949–1969*. Report of the Commission on Neutrality Policy. (Translation of SOU 1994:11) (Stockholm: Fritzes, 1994). See also Dalsjö, *Life-Line Lost*.

universal, but selective. Moreover, only 30% of those who had served later volunteered for international service.

This meant that Sweden's defence establishment was highly inefficient, especially when the output in military terms was compared to the input in economic and manpower terms. Moreover, "black holes" appeared regularly in the defence budget, caused by cost overruns, bad book-keeping, and by a change in the budget system. This led to further closures of bases, and to emergency reductions of training and operations. Some functions were close to becoming sub-critical.

## 8. The Time for Radical Reform

In 2004 Håkan Syrén became Supreme Commander of the armed forces. Syrén quickly saw that major reforms of the armed forces were needed. A few months after taking office, he turned in the annual budget proposal to the government, a proposal prepared under his predecessor. But he also took the unheard-of step of adding a personal letter which questioned the relevance of the budget document's content. A few months later he sent the government a document expanding upon his views on the need for fundamental reforms. As early as the summer of 2004, he distributed the first in a series of booklets outlining his views on defence reform to all armed forces personnel.<sup>11</sup> He also visited all military bases and establishments to spread his message and to listen to reactions. The booklets gave the impression that Syrén had a clear view of what the problems were, and which direction the armed forces needed to go, but also that he used the booklets and other forms of dialogue in order to "road-test" ideas and solutions. In the first booklet, he argued for

- cutting the number of superannuated staff officers by making most officers retire earlier;
- reshaping conscription so that only volunteers served, and then hiring them;
- a radical shift in procurement from slow and costly development, to buying off the shelf;
- less focus on fighters and ships, and more on add-on, such as weapons.

In later booklets he argued for armed forces available for operations "here

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<sup>11</sup> Håkan Syrén, *Vägen framåt – en liten bok om en stor förändring* (Stockholm: Försvarsmakten, 2004). This booklet was followed by *Här och nu* (2006); *Både och* (2007); and *Vaktombyte* (2009).

and now”, both “home and abroad”. The visions of the RMA/NCW prophets quietly fell by the wayside.

The prospects for defence reform improved in 2006, when a centre-right coalition took over the government. This was perhaps not because of the change in political colour, but the fact that a new team came in, with fresh eyes and unfettered by stances taken earlier. Moreover, the time was ripe, as more and more people came to the conclusions that Syrén and other critics were right in that the existing system was patently dysfunctional and had reached the end of the line.

Until the end of 2009, Sweden had three parallel sets of forces, plus the Home Guard:

- the “operations forces”, which existed mainly on paper and were to be manned by reservists. These forces could thus only be used for the defence of Sweden, a task which had been written off for the foreseeable future.
- the “register units”, normally battalions which Sweden had reported to various force registers, and consisting of reservists who had signed a volunteer contract to serve abroad if called up.
- the “overseas force”, consisting of the units actually sent out. These were either parts of the register force, or ad hoc-units formed for the purpose of a specific mission, such as ISAF. When they came back from deployment overseas, experienced and hardened into a proper unit, they were disbanded.

Besides Syrén’s campaign for reform, two factors helped highlight the dysfunctionality of the old system. One was the Nordic Battle-Group (NBG), an EU battle group for which Sweden was the framework nation and provided the core battalion and many of the enablers.<sup>12</sup> After the eclipse of the network-centric hype, the NBG became the new centre of attention. Little cost or effort was spared in getting this unit into tip-top shape for high readiness in the first half of 2008. But the period of readiness came and went without the unit being used, whereupon it was disbanded. Though the NBG was very impressive, this seemed like a waste of effort, and it gnawed at the belief in the existing system.

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<sup>12</sup> Other contributors were Norway, Finland, Estonia, and Ireland.

The second factor was a public debate on the balance between forces for international and for national tasks, which started in earnest in the summer of 2007. Critics charged that the government and the armed forces were focussing too much on forces for international peace-support operations, and neglected the needs for national defence, always inherent but now also highlighted by a more assertive Russia. On the other side were those who denied that there was any need for capabilities for national defence, as there was no threat from Russia, and that Sweden should focus on overseas operations.

This debate helped draw attention to the fact that the dichotomy between international and national tasks was a construct, not something given, and that it stemmed from the way the Swedish armed forces were organised, with one set of forces for national tasks, and another for international tasks. This raised the issue of solving the rivalry by having a single set of forces, for tasks at home as well as overseas.

Two other elements helped provide impetus for radical reform. The first was that Håkan Syrén and Norway's Chief of Defence, Sverre Diesen, had a meeting of the minds and saw the potential for synergies in bilateral defence cooperation, such as on logistics, training, and procurement. Pooling resources might be the only alternative to shedding functions resulting in the danger of becoming sub-critical. Their report on the matter met with enthusiastic support, and Finland soon wanted to join the bandwagon. This served to blur the lines between what was national and what was international. And defence cooperation in a Nordic context was acceptable to many who would otherwise shun cooperation in the context of NATO or the EU. Moreover, the previous government had already prepared the ground for deeper defence cooperation, by declaring that anything short of NATO's article 5 was potentially kosher.

The second element that helped provide impetus for the doability of radical reforms was the example of Denmark's defence transformation. Starting in 2004, Denmark transformed its armed forces from a conscription-based anti-invasion defence, with international operations as a side task, to an all volunteer force for high-end international expeditionary operations. While the Danes still had some problems, e.g. in recruitment and retention of specialists, the speed and depth of their transformation was impressive. As well, the Danes produced more in terms of military output than did Sweden, on a budget that was only 60% of Sweden's. Part of the Danish trick was a more thrifty approach to

procurement, settling for what was good enough off the shelf now, rather than paying extra for promises of perfect and tailor-made in the future, and designing to cost, rather than to extreme specifications.

## 9. Reform is Enacted

The centre-right government kept up the practice of having a Defence Commission, with representatives of all parties in Parliament, as a forum for deliberation on defence and security affairs. But the chairmen of the Commission were now to be provided by the Conservatives, the leading party in the coalition, which also held the post of minister for defence. The previous Commission had been derided by critics for applying too post-modern a perspective on security affairs, writing off conflicts between states or over borders, in favour of terrorism, climate change and pandemics. The first report of the new Commission, published in December 2007, turned out to be a change in a more traditional and hard-nosed direction, including a sombre analysis of developments in Russia.<sup>13</sup>

Most importantly, the Commission asserted – unanimously – that it could not envisage a military threat that would only affect Sweden or another single country in our region. The Commission even went one step further and issued a “declaration of solidarity”, according to which Sweden would not remain passive should another EU Member State or another Nordic country be struck by disaster or by an attack. By the same token, Sweden expected these countries to take similar action should Sweden be so affected. This declaration was soon made into government policy by its inclusion in official government statements.<sup>14</sup>

The decision of how Sweden would help in case a sister nation was threatened would still be a sovereign one. But the declaration of solidarity nonetheless represented a break with an almost 200 year-old tradition of seeing Sweden’s security in isolation, if need be at the expense of our neighbours. It remains to be seen whether all concerned have understood the potential implications of this step.

The Commission’s second report, published in June 2008, dealt mainly with

<sup>13</sup> *Säkerhet i samverkan: Försvarsberedningens omvärldsanalys*, Ds 2007:46 (Stockholm: Regeringskansliet/Fö, 2007). Downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/306/a/93589>.

<sup>14</sup> Regeringens deklaration vid 2008 års utrikespolitiska debatt i Riksdagen onsdagen den 13 februari 2008; Statement of Government Policy 16 September 2008, downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/108/a/111081>.



the future shape of Sweden's armed forces. The second report repeated the first report's declaration of solidarity, but added the important follow-on that this meant that Sweden must be able to give and to receive military assistance. This may seem a small step for mankind, but given the past, it was a giant leap for Swedish declaratory doctrine. Concerning the structure of the armed forces, the Commission's report advocated a change to a system with a single set of forces for all tasks, national and international, manned by volunteers. There would be a mix of standing units manned by regulars, and units manned by volunteer reservists, akin to the US National Guard. Conscription should be discontinued, but would remain on the books, in case of national emergency. All units should be fully manned and equipped, and ready for deployment at short notice. Moreover, the Commission pushed for the implementation of revised principles for procurement – previously enunciated but not acted on – in line with the Danish ones. Streamlining of training and support functions was also part of the package, making it possible to fund an all-volunteer force.<sup>15</sup>

Less than two months after the Commission's final report was published, Russia attacked Georgia, an act of aggression to which Sweden reacted strongly. Wisely, the Commission had been rather pessimistic in its assessment of Russia and stated that Russia's policy towards its neighbours in the Caucasus would be a litmus test. The war in Georgia triggered a shift in the debate over defence policy, clearly in favour of tasks closer to home than Afghanistan. The concern was not so much a Russian invasion of Sweden (Russia was still too weak for that), as military threats against some of our neighbours. However, the defence force structure proposed by the Commission was equally useful for solving tasks in our vicinity, as for solving tasks far overseas. Moreover, the proposed new structure, when in place, could deliver operational capability within days, while the old structure needed months or years to be ready for combat.

The defence reform bill was prepared in the ministry of defence, on the basis of the Commission's report, which had the support of all parties, and in dialogue with the high command of the armed forces.<sup>16</sup> The bill had a number of guiding lights, the principal of which were:

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<sup>15</sup> *Försvar i användning* Ds 2008:48 (Stockholm: Regeringskansliet/Fö, 2008). Downloadable at <http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/10715/a/107264>.

<sup>16</sup> There were some marginal reservations by a couple of parties.

Focus on operational effect, here and now;

One set of forces both for tasks at home, in our vicinity, and far overseas;

An all-volunteer force, with a mix of standing units with regulars and on-call units with volunteer reservists. The air force and the navy were to be standing, the army mixed. Conscription should be kept dormant.

Reintroduction of a corps of non-commissioned officers.

All units to be fully manned, trained and equipped.

A transfer of funds to operations from development, procurement and support.

Thrifter procurement principles and streamlined support structures.

While the number of units would decline slightly as compared to the previous system, the new units would exist in reality, not just on paper, and the structure as a whole would be much more powerful, and more readily available for actual use.

## **10. The Way Forward**

Now, we are in the midst of implementing this major defence reform, and thus our armed forces are currently in transition. The aim is for the new organisation to be up and running by 2014, although the armed forces report that not all units will be fully manned until some years later. Sweden intends to be the framework nation and provide the core battalion for an EU battle-group in 2015. And hopefully, this core battalion will then be a battalion of the line, rather than the type of pick-up team we have had set up until now.

Reform is under way. Conscription has been discontinued, and recruitment of volunteer soldiers is going very well, with up to ten applicants for every slot, and officers report that they have never before had such good soldier material. The recruitment of part-time soldiers was lagging initially, but picked after political pressure was applied and after the legal framework for part-time service was put in place by mid-2012. Signs are that that recruitment will not be a problem, but that retention might be. An 18-year old may sign a contract for eight years, but a few years later decide he or she wants to do something different. And we have no legal means of forcing soldiers to stay, unless Sweden itself is under threat. Training a soldier is costly and takes time; a high turn-over rate

would thus be costly both in terms of money and of unit-capability. There seems to be good reason to look at incentives to make people stay longer, such as a bonus for having served a certain number years.

A new Defence Commission has recently been assigned, with the dual tasks of producing an update of the international situation and of security policy, and an update on defence policy. While no major changes to the ongoing defence reform are foreseen, there may be issues – such as soldier retention, or overall economy – which need to be addressed.

Sweden is reintroducing a corps of non-commissioned officers, after an ill-fated experiment with a single corps of officers, which lasted almost 30 years. The NCOs are meant to do what they do in almost all armed forces: constitute the back-bone of the forces, act as deputy commanders, handle the troops, or be technical specialists. Some of the new NCOs are young and trained for the task, but most will be older lieutenants and captains reassigned to NCO-slots, but allowed to keep their rank and salary. This process is not without difficulties, as there is a measure of grumbling among those assigned to NCO-slots. Getting the NCO corps right is a matter of utmost importance, because if we get it wrong we undercut a key aspect of the reform, and create a problem which may last a very long time.

A factor putting brakes on the tempo of transformation is the availability of funds. The dearth of funding is not a matter of cuts in the defence budget. While most European countries are cutting defence budgets in the face of fiscal crisis, Sweden has its financial and fiscal house in order, and we can keep our defence budget constant, in real terms. This is something both our defence and finance ministers are rightfully proud of. But living on a fixed budget still means that we have to free up funds from the old system to pay for the new. Streamlining support structures, reducing redundancies and abandoning expensive old procurement habits are bound to encounter resistance from within the system and from vested interests. Thus, management attention and pressure, both from the political level and from leaders in the armed forces and in defence agencies, are needed to push reform through.

Two of the problems on the streamlining to-do list stand out. The first is that, as a result of previous cuts in force structure, in combination with Swedish laws on job security, we have an oversized and top-heavy officer corps, which is much too costly. More needs to be done to encourage redundant officers to

transfer to a second career. The second problem is getting the armed forces, the defence procurement agency, and industry to shed ingrained habits of cosy cohabitation, involving the domestic development of marvels of engineering, at great cost and with very long lead-times. We need to bring down costs and lead-times, and get a procurement system that is more responsive to shifting needs. And this calls for a more business-like attitude, a clearer separation between buyer and seller, and a willingness to accept 'good enough' today, rather than go for what might be perfect, somewhere in a distant future.

As to the changes in security policy, where this voyage takes us remains to be seen. We have only begun to explore the extent of the political space opened up by the declaration of solidarity. There may be unforeseen events, which could derail – or accelerate – developments. But the new direction has nonetheless been charted. 200 years after the loss of Finland, Sweden wants to join the European mainstream again.