Discussion Article

NATO's Nordic enlargement: Reconfiguring Sweden's foreign policy identity after 200 years of neutrality and non-alignment

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Abstract

Prompted by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, Sweden and Finland have undergone a paradigm shift in their foreign policies as they decided to abandon the doctrine of military non-alignment and join NATO. In this discussion article, we argue that the policy changes have been accompanied by fundamental shifts in the countries' identities. This is particularly the case for Sweden, which long perceived itself as a 'moral superpower' in both foreign and domestic policy terms. A key transformation brought about by the changes in the security environment has been a reconfiguration of the relationship between Sweden and Finland. We argue that the changes in the two countries' identities may be long-lasting, affecting the way in which Sweden and Finland perceive their positions among the Nordic countries – and the broader Western alliance.

Keywords

Sweden, Finland, NATO, security, identity, foreign policy

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Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine has been a major disruptive event for all of Europe. For Sweden and Finland, it has meant a deep shift in security policy, prompting them to Break with the tradition of military non-alignment and to seek membership in NATO. Such policy shifts also fundamentally affect a state's *identity*. Here the changes have been profound, particularly for Sweden. Both in foreign and domestic politics, real-world events have forced Sweden to reconsider its self-narrative as a peaceful 'people's home', a safe haven outside the world's conflict zones. In foreign policy terms, Sweden has traditionally positioned itself as a 'moral superpower' (Dahl, 2006), an arbiter of peace that observes conflicts from afar instead of participating in them. Domestically Sweden has been, or so the narrative goes, a tolerant, liberal country that has smoothly taken in more than its share of refugees and migrant workers.

Both parts of Sweden's identity have, in recent times, been seriously shattered. The war in Ukraine led Sweden to seek membership in NATO, which has not, however, been as easy as imagined with Hungary and especially Turkey holding the Swedish membership hostage to their own, broader foreign policy goals. The outburst in gang violence particularly in city suburbs with large populations with foreign background but also, increasingly, in wealthier areas, has led Swedish policymakers to acknowledge problems related to integration of newcomers. The rising salience of immigration and crime further boosts the Sweden Democrats, a nationalist far-right party whose ascendancy to power is, in itself, a major disruption in Swedish politics.

In this discussion article, we put these recent changes in Sweden's foreign and domestic policy and identity in a wider historical and geopolitical context. In particular, we discuss Sweden's relationship with Finland, its immediate neighbour and closest partner. Finland has always – since it was historically part of the Swedish Kingdom – been the little brother in this relationship. Yet the events following the Russian war in Ukraine seem to have fundamentally changed this. Finland took the lead in the two countries' parallel NATO processes, and was accepted into the Alliance in April 2023, whereas Sweden finds itself still in the waiting room. We argue that the NATO process, alongside the larger geopolitical changes the Ukraine war has unleashed, have changed, potentially for good, the way Sweden and Finland consider their positions among the Nordics and the larger Western alliance.

A decade of change

Arguably, Sweden had its wake-up call already in 2013, when during the so-called 'Russian Easter' (Gyllander, 2022) Russian jets simulated an attack on Swedish territory. As Sweden had no pilots and jets in readiness, NATO came to help: Danish jets on Baltic Air Policing duty scrambled to intercept the Russian planes. Sweden had to acknowledge back then that military power had not become obsolete and that history did not end after the Cold War, after all. One year later, Russia's annexation of Crimea followed, further amplifying the signal that Sweden had to start taking defence seriously again. As a result, Sweden reintroduced partial conscription in 2017 and reestablished the Gotland regiment that had been discontinued in 2005. Ten years after the Russian Easter, Sweden is waiting to join NATO, thus completing the country's security policy transformation.

The changes, despite having taken place over the course of ten years, are fundamental in nature and require a wider adjustment of Sweden's foreign policy identity. Sweden's so-called 'strategic timeout' (Kunz, 2015, p. 12) in the beginning of the 2000s did not impact only the armed forces, which were scaled down significantly, but also the public debate, where security policy was not a priority topic for decades. Compared to Finland, where the NATO decision was based on a national security-

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related calculation, in Sweden the NATO debate in the spring of 2022 was inherently about domestic party politics. Two years later, with membership application submitted but ratification by Turkey and Hungary still pending, a shift in Sweden's public debate is observable: references are made to a closer alignment with Finland. National security is starting to play a greater role and an increasing consensus is emerging among the Swedish public, business community, and politicians about different kinds of security threats that are directed against Sweden.

Finland: promotion to big brother

For Sweden, the question of NATO membership has ostensibly been linked to its eastern neighbour Finland. An important facilitating factor in Sweden's decision to join Finland in the NATO bid was that Finland was also ruled by Social Democrats at the time, which somewhat mitigated the identity crisis caused by the necessity to break with Sweden's long-standing non-alignment policy. It also gave the Swedish Social Democrats (*Socialdemokraterna, S*) a way to outsource part of the political responsibility for the decision to Finland – as then-Foreign Minister Ann Linde reportedly said: 'Damned Finns, now we also might have to join NATO' (Strömberg and Nilsson, 2022). In a full circle, however, S – now in opposition – has fully taken ownership of the NATO decision and has even criticised the Moderate-led government for allegedly mismanaging the NATO process by failing to stick together with Finland (Svensson, 2023).

The rhetoric throughout the NATO process was strongly focused on the close relations, indeed friendship between the countries. Finland's President Sauli Niinistö reversed the Swedish Winter War volunteer slogan 'Finland's cause is ours' by saying that 'Sweden's cause is ours' (Bornlid Lesseur, 2022). The friendship between the countries was emphasised by both sides in the rhetoric to join NATO 'hand in hand'. The close coordination on a daily basis on all political levels was in a marked contrast to 1995 when both Finland and Sweden joined the European Union, but Sweden made the decision without appropriately informing the Finnish counterparts, who had to hurry to join at the same time – something that is still remembered in Finland with some bitterness.

The shared Finnish-Swedish history played a central role in Sweden's decision to join NATO. In the early Cold War decades, the 'Finnish question' (Dahl, 2004; Bergquist et al., 2016, p. 60) was part of Sweden's justification not to join the Western alliance: had it done so, it would have put Finland in a difficult position as the sole neutral country right next to the Soviet Union, with limited foreign policy room for manoeuvre due to the Finno-Soviet friendship treaty of 1948. In a similar vein, last year the Swedish S-led government argued that there was no feasible alternative for Sweden to stay outside of the Alliance once Finland made the decision to join. One of the alternatives that the Swedish government explored was a closer Finnish-Swedish defence union, which Finland had occasionally proposed but about which Sweden had hitherto remained lukewarm.

The NATO process reversed the traditional roles of Finland and Sweden in the bilateral relationship, upgrading Finland to the role of a 'big brother'. After jointly submitting the NATO applications on 18 May 2022, *Expressen* ran a lead article in Finnish, thanking 'big brother Finland' for 'NATO help' (Expressen, 2022), admitting that without Finland, Sweden would never have made it. In March 2023, when it began to look increasingly likely that Finland would get a green light from Turkey and could end up going ahead without Sweden, it was suggested in *Expressen* that Sweden should just join Finland instead (Barth-Kron, 2023). The fact that Finland finally proceeded without Sweden and became NATO's 31st member while Sweden was left in the waiting room was itself for Sweden a new experience: for the first time, Finland made it into an international organisation while Sweden remains blocked from membership. For Finland, Sweden's accession as soon as possible remains

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the highest priority. Finland's first official act as NATO member was to ratify Sweden's membership, approximately 15 seconds after finalising its own accession.

Sweden's Nordic identity – not so non-aligned

Another important factor for the Swedish NATO decision was its Nordic identity. The rhetoric of building a 'Nord-NATO' (Nilsson, 2022) was prevalent in the NATO debates. Sweden, given its geographical position in the middle of the Nordic region, is a must-have member in NATO. This was also the conclusion in Sweden: there was no viable alternative to applying together with Finland (Nordgren, 2022). The already close Nordic cooperation, also in the field of defence, offers Sweden a natural orientation framework that eases the task of navigating the massive security policy changes in such a short time.

Nordic cooperation dates back to the failed attempt to establish a Scandinavian defence union after the World Wars and continued throughout the Cold War despite Sweden's official – and contradictory – neutrality policy. While Swedish politicians vehemently asserted the firmness of Sweden's neutrality, the armed forces had established significant contacts to and cooperation with NATO – unbeknownst to the Swedish public. The secret arrangements with NATO caused Americans to describe Sweden as 'neutral on our side' (for a more in-depth discussion of Sweden's Cold War neutrality policy and secret links to NATO, see Holmström, 2023).

The narrative of 200 years of neutrality or, after joining the EU in 1995, that of non-alignment, was indeed even in the Cold War era much more a public narrative than objective reality. Not only did Sweden cooperate so extensively especially with its NATO member neighbours Norway and Denmark, but also the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), that it was called the '17th member' of the alliance within NATO (Dahl, 2006). In addition, behind the scenes Sweden received secret security assurances from the US in exchange for giving up its own nuclear weapons development program in the early 1970s (Jonter, 2006, pp. 258-259). In that sense, Sweden was a member of NATO already for a long time in all but name.

The end of the moral superpower?

Sweden has a long-standing, strongly normative foreign policy tradition that is deeply rooted in the Social Democratic Party that has been ruling Sweden for most of the post-World War era – S has been in opposition in only 6 legislature periods, including the current one. The legacy of the Social Democratic prime minister Olof Palme, who was Sweden's leading Cold War political figure and known for his anti-imperialist stance and strong engagement in the so-called third world, strongly formed Sweden's foreign policy identity for decades to come – beyond party lines.

It was precisely Sweden's self-proclaimed status as a 'moral superpower' and accordingly activist foreign policy tradition that has caused hurdles in Sweden's NATO accession process. Especially the Swedish Social Democrats' support for the Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), connected to the terrorist-labelled Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and People's Defence Unit (YPG), has prompted Turkey to stall Sweden's NATO accession. Conversely, it was always the argument against NATO membership on the political Left that Sweden should not enter an alliance with a country like Turkey and let an autocrat like the Turkish president Erdogan dictate its policy. The dilemma prompted one headline in the leading daily *Dagens Nyheter* to ask, 'is Sweden too democratic for NATO?' (Ramberg, 2023).

Non-alignment was considered an essential precondition of Sweden's normative foreign policy

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activism during the Cold War era and beyond. Joining NATO is therefore a greater change politically than militarily – as an opinion piece in *Dagens Nyheter* put it, 'if we join NATO, we Swedes can no longer be the world's conscience' (Skjönsberg, 2023). In a marked contrast to the S, the incumbent Moderate Party (*Moderaterna, M*) announced the end of Sweden's feminist foreign policy after coming into power in October 2022. M was initially very self-confident that they would get Sweden into NATO in a speedy manner, as they did not have similar baggage with links to Kurdish actors and had been one of Sweden's pro-NATO political parties prior to the decision to join the Alliance.

However, M soon had to learn that Turkey's objections were not easy to overcome, especially as they centred on demands to extradite people Turkey – but not Sweden – considers to be terrorists. No Swedish government can interfere with the judicial process of extradition decisions. Hence, in January 2023 Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson had to admit that there was nothing more to be done on the Swedish side and the ball was in Erdogan's court.

Reality check: values come with a price

Especially the difficulties Sweden has encountered with Turkey's objections to ratifying the Swedish membership, based on claims that Sweden supports Kurdish terrorist organisations, have proven a hard reality check. Repeated Quran burnings in the spring of 2023 that enraged Turkey and led to further delay in the NATO ratification process showed that sometimes there can be a trade-off between values and security interests. Sweden has a particularly strong, constitutionally anchored protection of freedom of speech, which is a core fundamental value in Swedish society. The Quran burning incidents were a painful example that such liberal democratic values can be instrumentalised against the country's security interests.

The public discourse on the matter initially started as unequivocally uncompromising on the freedom of speech on both sides of the political spectrum, but the consensus started breaking as the situation escalated to the point of increased threat of terrorism in Sweden and violent attacks against Swedish representations in Turkey and Arab countries. By July 2023, a total of 53 percent of respondents in a poll commissioned by SVT were in favour of banning the burning of any religious books (SVT, 2023).

In a marked contrast, Finland avoided such a situation, as it still has controversial blasphemy laws in place. What is more, the Finnish experience during the Cold War was that national survival can require compromising on some core democratic values, such as the freedom of expression, during the so-called Finlandisation period. In Finland, the culture of self-censorship persisted to an extent in the political communication even after the Cold War, as the decades-long prioritisation of securing sovereignty vis-à-vis the Russian neighbour even at the cost of domestic democratic standards had been a deeply internalised socialisation process for political elites.

From People's Home to gang violence and far-right influence

The shifts in Sweden's foreign policy identity have been accompanied by long-brewing changes in its domestic politics and security situation. Gang violence has become a regular feature of life in the bigger cities, particularly the Stockholm area. Recently, the violence has spread from suburbs mostly populated by non-ethnic Swedes to wealthier areas and city centres, forcing the public and policymakers to confront the question: what happened to the peaceful People's Home Sweden perceived itself to be?

Assessing the root causes of the wave of violence is beyond the scope of this article. We focus rather on the associated changes that have taken place in the Swedish political system in the last decade.

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First, polarisation within its party system has changed. Swedish politics was long dominated by the socio-economic, left-right political axis, with a mighty S habitually gathering almost 50 percent of the vote in general elections. Parliamentary parties were, since mid-2000s, organised into two competing blocs, a green–left bloc led by the Social Democrats and a bourgeois bloc led by M.

This began to change with the ascent of the far-right nationalist party Sweden Democrats in the 2010s. Sweden was long thought to be an exception among Western democracies also in this regard: no far-right party appeared to be able to break through in its political system. No longer so. All the mainstream parties first responded by erecting a *cordon sanitaire* against Sweden Democrats, pledging that they would never cooperate with the illiberal, xenophobic party they perceived the SD to be. Yet this did not stem the popularity of SD. The party had entered parliament in 2010 with 5.7 percent of the vote; by mid-2010s, its popularity skyrocketed with the help of the so-called migrant crisis and coming to the 2020s, it was close to 20 percent in the polls.

The rise of SD has sent shock waves through the Swedish political system. Most importantly, it has meant that reaching parliamentary majorities without the Sweden Democrats' support has become virtually impossible – as was the case also with NATO membership. This is a significant conundrum for the mainstream parties that had, after all, sworn never to cooperate with the SD and ultimately led them to reach innovative solutions. In practice, keeping the SD out meant cooperating across the – thus far sacrosanct – bloc barriers. After the 2018 election, the bourgeois side could not agree on whether to try and form a right-wing government with the support of SD. The Moderates flirted with the idea, but the Liberals (L) and Christian Democrats (KD) would not have it. As a result, the L and KD broke away from the bourgeois bloc and joined the left bloc instead, agreeing to support a Social Democratic-led minority government.

The road proved to be rocky, and in the end the KD and L re-joined the bourgeois side before the 2022 election. In this election, the SD reached another milestone, surpassing the Moderates, with 20.5 per cent of the vote, as the largest party on the right-wing side. This effectively meant the end of the strategy of shutting it out of all inter-party cooperation. In a remarkable volte-face compared to their earlier position, the bourgeois parties led by the Moderates eventually agreed to form a right-wing minority government with the SD officially outside the coalition, but in practice supporting it.

The growth of SD and the re-polarisationof Sweden's party system is not only a question of parliamentary mathematics, but also – and perhaps most importantly – a question of a fundamental realignment of the political issue space. As forming majorities along the left–right axis has become more difficult, socio-cultural political issues, to do with questions of identity and ethnicity, have taken up more space in political debate. This has led to a reframing of public debate on issues such as immigration and integration policy from the perspective of security and law-and-order, excluding other perspectives – such as, a social policy perspective – that might justify other types of policy responses. The power to reframe political debate in this way is quite possibly the most potent way in which the far right currently exercises power in Sweden as well as in other Western democracies.

Image control

Sweden has not only perceived itself as a foreign policy 'superpower', but also in terms of domestic politics, the consensus has been that Sweden can do a little bit more and a little bit better than the rest. This self-narrative has arguably guided Swedish politics in a range of issues, from immigration to defence policy. As real-world events have shattered this image, Swedish policymakers and the public now have to re-write this narrative, to configure 'Sverigebilden', the image of itself both internally and

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externally.

The battle over who gets to define this narrative – and ultimately, who gets to define what kind of country Sweden now is becoming – has already begun. Commentators on the political Right blame the Left – particularly the Social Democrats, who sat in government for the past eight years – for choosing rather to uphold a polished, but false, image of Sweden as a liberal, tolerant haven, than to openly talk about the problems related to immigration, integration and crime – before it was too late (Neuding, 2023). After the current government took over, the accusation goes, the Left was then quick to change position and to both admit that Sweden is facing serious problems and accuse the incumbent centre-right government for it.

At present, both sides of the ideological aisle not only agree on how serious a situation Sweden now faces with the escalation of gang violence, but also to a large extent on the measures required to combat it. So far, the political Left has given its tacit support to legislative changes proposed by the government, focusing on better surveillance and harder punishments for gang-related crime. The Left has underlined the need to focus also on preventive measures as well as the danger of trading off personal freedoms for more surveillance, but the acute seriousness of the situation has toned down partisan differences – for now.

Conclusion

The failure of Sweden's moral superpower in both domestic and foreign policy has led to a profound identity crisis. As a recent journalistic podcast put it, 'we went from being the country everyone wants to be, to being a cautionary tale' (*Svenska Dagbladet,* 2023). The situation now requires the re-writing of Sweden's narrative, both internally and externally. This new self-image finds itself open to political contestation, with both international developments and domestic politics contributing to the process of determining what the new narrative will look like. Basing policy on a moral high ground is a balancing act. While Sweden's neutrality policy enabled a prosperous post-World War development domestically and served as a cornerstone of the activist 'third way' foreign policy, the disingenuous official policy was de facto undermined by behind-the-scenes cooperation with NATO countries. The generous immigration policy combined with insufficient integration efforts is now having repercussions not only for domestic stability but also for Sweden's international image.

Currently, Sweden is facing a threefold unravelling of core parts of its foreign policy that link to domestic policy failures: the end of neutrality and non-alignment that was the cornerstone of Swedish foreign and security policy for 200 years; immigration and integration policy has proved a failure as Sweden is now exporting crime, not peace; and its Middle East policy and role as a neutral mediator has been shattered due to the Quran burnings – a recent study conducted by Novus in cooperation with an Iraqi institute finds Sweden's image at rock-bottom (Dahlberg, 2023).

Navigating these challenges in what Prime Minister Kristersson has frequently described as the most tense security situation since the Cold War, necessitates a reconfiguration in light of both domestic and international drivers. Despite alignment with Finland on the NATO decision, for Sweden's NATO profile, identity questions will likely remain more relevant than in the Finnish case. While in Finland, the political consensus shifted nearly unanimously from staying outside of NATO to supporting membership, in Sweden the parties further on the political Left (the Greens, *Miljöpartiet* and the Left Party, *Vänsterpartiet*) remain in opposition to NATO membership. Various aspects of Sweden's NATO policy, such as nuclear sharing and NATO presence on Swedish territory, can therefore be expected to become politicised.

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