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Sweden is one of only a handful of EU countries which are not members of NATO. **Jan Joel Andersson** *provides an overview of Swedish defence policy and assesses the potential for Sweden to use the EU as an alternative to NATO membership. He argues that the myth of the country's policy of 'armed neutrality' during the Cold War is still a key obstacle to gaining public support for joining NATO. However in practice Sweden has effectively used informal bilateral co-operation with the US and other European states to ensure its security.*

Defence policy is currently the object of a heated public debate in Sweden. In most of Europe today, defence policy is not a topic of much concern, let alone national debate. So, why in Sweden – and why now?

This unusual debate began in late December of last year when the Chief of Swedish Defence, General Sverker Göransson, stated in a widely-circulated interview that if Sweden were to be attacked, it would only be able to defend itself for one week before requiring foreign assistance. NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen later added that although Sweden is NATO's most active and most capable partner, it could not count on assistance in the event of an attack, since the Alliance Article 5 security guarantee only extends to members of NATO, an organisation that Sweden refuses to join. Sweden's Defence Minister Karin Enström stated in a later interview, however, that Sweden could rely on the EU for assistance since the Lisbon Treaty provides a solidarity clause, article 42.7, obligating EU member states to assist fellow EU members in case of catastrophic events or attacks.

The debate escalated when, on 22 April, the Swedish morning daily *Svenska Dagbladet* reported that Russian nuclear-capable bomber aircraft had launched a night mock attack against assumed targets in Stockholm and Southern Sweden several weeks earlier during the Easter weekend. Not only was this information kept secret by the Swedish military, but of even greater concern was the fact that no Swedish fighter jets were available to respond that night due to overtime restrictions on pilots and lack of funding. NATO, in contrast, scrambled its stand-by air policing unit in Lithuania and trailed the Russian bombers over the Baltic Sea as they returned to base.

Swedish Navy officer during exercise (Credit: Michael Sandberg, CC BY 2.0)

News of the Russian mock attack and lackluster Swedish response led to outrage among the Swedish public and commentators, and bewilderment among international defence analysts. In response, the Swedish military and government played down the event, stating that Russian aircraft never actually entered the country's air space. Indeed, Foreign Minister Carl Bildt commented that "We don't react to everything, we're not up in the air for everything and we shouldn't be". He later added that there was no factual basis to the claim that the Russian aircraft were actually conducting a mock attack on Sweden.

Swedish Defence Policy and NATO

This series of events has left many wondering, both in Sweden and abroad, what Sweden's defence policy actually consists of. What is the state of Sweden's defence? Does Sweden really believe the EU is a military alliance? Why does Sweden refuse to join NATO? These are all good questions, some of which are echoed in other European countries as well.

For those who have not closely studied Swedish defence policy over the past two decades, here is a brief history. During the Cold War, Sweden pursued a combination of a relatively strong territorial defence and an activist foreign policy of non-alignment aimed at reducing tensions between the Superpowers. This official policy of "armed neutrality" was complemented by secret bilateral cooperation with the United States and select NATO countries that would guarantee Western support in case of a war with the Soviet Union. A few years after the end of the Cold War, Sweden joined the EU, declared that there were no regional military threats to the country, took a strategic time out, and rapidly dismantled its territorial defence organisation to focus exclusively on international operations led by NATO and the EU.

The Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 rattled people in many countries, including Sweden. With no territorial defence to speak of, but still determined to stay outside NATO, the Swedish government unilaterally issued a solidarity declaration in 2009 in regard to its Nordic neighbors and other EU members. This declaration spells out that Sweden will support these countries in case of disaster or armed attack and that Sweden in turn expects similar support if affected by disaster or attack. With limited military resources and with conscription officially abolished in 2010, this unilateral Swedish solidarity declaration was received with skepticism if not down-right ridicule by fellow Nordic and Baltic countries that quite frankly didn't know what to make of it.

However, while Swedish defence policy has been the object of criticism and some ridicule at home and around the Baltic Sea, it has been lauded by military experts and government officials in Washington and Brussels as a leading example of the effective transformation of national defence and a model of military professionalism. In fact, since the end of the Cold War, the Swedish armed forces have been transformed from a massive, but rather poorly-trained and poorly-equipped conscript-based territorial defence force to a small, professional and technologically-advanced military focused on expeditionary operations in coalition with others.

Indeed, over the past 15 years, the Swedish military has gained increasing international respect for its ability to deploy well-equipped, well trained, technologically advanced and mature soldiers in complete units that can effectively integrate with US, NATO and European forces in operations from Central Asia to Central Africa. The Swedish Air Force is rated among the very best in the world, and its contribution to the Libya operation, as well as its decision to invest in heavy airlift and modern helicopters, are much appreciated. The Swedish Navy has in turn demonstrated that it can participate in and lead international flotillas in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and has proven its unrivalled submarine capability by successfully attacking and "sinking" U.S. aircraft carriers undetected in extended war games in the Pacific Ocean.

One explanation for this apparent disconnect between local perceptions and those in Washington and Brussels, is that Sweden's security policy was traditionally composed of two equal parts: an inward-looking defence policy focused on defending the country against Soviet invasion, and an outward-looking foreign policy aimed at building relationships with the US and other powers. With the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the threat of invasion, I argue, defence policy became completely subordinate to foreign policy. When foreign policy influence is at stake, participating in international operations or exercises is far more important than patrolling the skies over Sweden, despite the government's repeated promise to ensure the sovereignty of the whole country, at all times. In fact, the reason that no Swedish fighters were on stand-by that Easter weekend was because crews and planes had already been stretched to their (overtime) limit following Swedish commitments to participate in and prepare for advanced combat training exercises with US and NATO air forces.

This Swedish form of post-Cold War foreign policy-led defence rests on the analysis that Russia is no longer and will no longer pose a military threat to the Nordic-Baltic region of Europe for the foreseeable future. Sweden's Nordic and Baltic neighbours are less willing than Sweden to embrace that analysis to the full extent that Sweden has, but

the view that Russia does not and will not pose a direct military threat to Northwestern Europe is widely shared by well-respected analysts and government officials in not only the US, but also across most of Europe.

Of course, all of this would not matter so very much if Sweden simply joined NATO, an unwillingness that may seem puzzling to outsiders. It is rooted in a domestic context in which the myth of Sweden's golden post-war years of economic prosperity and international moral standing has become closely tied to the myth of armed neutrality, in which Sweden alone stands between the East and the West, an upholder of world peace. So far, neither of the two big political parties, the Moderate party or the Social Democrats, have been willing to challenge these myths. Not surprisingly, opinion polls remain solidly against NATO membership. Moreover, Sweden's Cold War history of successfully seeking security through secret bilateral cooperation with the US and some European NATO countries also helps to explain why Sweden's leading political parties remain comfortable with this arrangement today, as they seek security through informal bilateral ties to the US and other European countries via the EU, rather than official membership in NATO.

However, the recent defence debate has not only outraged the Swedish public and been an international embarrassment for the country, but has also demonstrated the perils of conducting defence policy that lacks broad public support and understanding. Hopefully, these events will force Sweden's leading political parties to engage – finally – in an open debate on Swedish defence policy in general and on the pros and cons of joining NATO in particular. From the perspective of this author, such a debate is much overdue and of absolute necessity for any country that takes its security and defence policy seriously.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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