The “Good” Power? Sweden's Foreign Policy after Neutrality

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Abstract

This paper addresses the fundamental change or even identity crisis experienced in Swedish foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. Neutrality was for a major part of the postwar era a globally known core feature of Swedish foreign policy, which was combined with military conscription, civil defence, a strong domestic defence industry (to help sustain neutrality and national security), and a global role as mediator combined with a self-perceived moral superiority. With the end of the Cold War, the Swedish entry into the European Union, the downsizing and internationalization of the armed forces and the domestic defence industry – however – Swedish foreign and security policy has transformed, with uninvestigated consequences for Sweden’s role and standing in world politics. Neutrality was officially abandoned as a guiding principle more than twenty years ago; Sweden has ratified the EU's Lisbon treaty which contains a principle of solidarity among all member states; and the country has extensive and recently intensified military cooperation with NATO and individual NATO member states, including a host-nation support agreement that was ratified by the Swedish parliament in May 2016. This paper traces these and other fundamental changes in contemporary Swedish foreign policy, and asks how that affects its foreign policy role(s) in world politics. The paper draws on and contributes to role theory and more broadly to identity theory within foreign policy analysis.

Specific observations and arguments (expanded upon in the paper):
1. Swedish neutrality was officially abandoned when the country joined the EU in 1995. Unfortunately, there is still an international perception of Sweden as a “neutral” country, which is simply wrong. The official declaration since the EU entry is “military non-aligned”, which is considered compatible with both EU membership and NATO cooperation.

2. Among Swedish political parties, positions on a possible NATO membership have shifted dramatically. Until recently, only the small Liberal party advocated NATO membership (representing less than 6 % of the parliamentary seats). Since 2014-15, however, all of the center-right parties (the Moderates, the Christian Conservatives, and the Center Party, with the exception of the populist Sweden Democrats) say yes to Swedish NATO-membership. Thus, in just the last few years, the “yes to” side in the Parliament has grown from 6 % to 40 % of the parliamentary seats). The reason given for the dramatically increased parliamentarian support for NATO membership is the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and renewed military assertiveness in the Baltic Sea area. Public opinion is still more negative to NATO membership, however, even if the yes-side has grown stronger.

3. The question of Sweden as a “middle power” is a matter of identity more than any objective factor (such as the size of the population, the military, and the economy). Swedish actors, including governments from the left to the right, have tended to define Sweden as a “small state” rather than as a “middle power”. Indeed, the academic literature on small states typically depict Sweden as a clear example, which corresponds to the Swedish self-image. So, even if Sweden according to some objective measurements can be considered a “middle power”, Sweden perceives itself as small (or perhaps “smaller” than it actually is).

4. The foreign policy identity of Sweden, which previously was defined in terms of “a small, neutral state”, was also combined with a strong engagement in conflict resolution in other parts of the world (the social democratic Olof Palme tradition of international mediation combined with critique of superpower intervention, which right-wing critics condemn as an attempt to be a “moral superpower”). Strangely, however, this “internationalism” has not made Swedish actors perceive of Sweden as a “middle power”; the small state perception prevails. Indeed, those who talk about Sweden as a “moral superpower” does not believe that the country actually has power on par with any objectively defined middle or superpower, but are rather critiquing or ridiculing those who think Sweden really has a “moral” or “soft power” influence that “punches above its weight”.

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5. Since the EU entry, however, Swedish foreign policy identity has oscillated between the liberal-right-wing “European identity” (advocated mainly by Carl Bildt, during his years as prime minister, and later foreign minister), and the social democratic “internationalist” and more recently “feminist foreign policy”.

6. The “feminist foreign policy”, spearheaded by foreign minister Margot Wallström (former Vice-President of the EU Commission) is clearly an identity marker – showing how the government wants its foreign policy to be perceived. But the foreign ministry has also worked hard at filling this identity with content – specifically by promoting the UN resolution 1325 on women’s participation in peace and conflict resolution, and prevention of violence (including systematic rapes) against women in armed conflicts. The government also makes clear that they want to increase women’s participation in global politics more generally, and the Swedish cabinet itself consists of 50 % women, as a symbolic marker of this ambition. The 2017 Foreign Ministry’s action plan for a feminist foreign policy declares six “focus areas”: Strengthening the human rights for women and girls who are migrating and fleeing from war; combating violence against women and girls within families and other private relations; promoting the role of women and girls in conflict prevention; promoting the actorness of women and girls as a strategy to combat “shrinking democratic spaces” and “the dual vulnerability of girls”; strengthening the economic independence and influence of women and girls by for example promoting non-discriminatory legislation.

7. The feminist foreign policy has received a lot of attention, both negative and positive, internationally as well as domestically. The domestic critique comes not only from right-wing groups, but also from some feminists who claim it is mainly empty words and symbolism and no real action.

8. The paper ends by discussing Sweden’s search for a foreign policy identity as a perpetual identity crisis.