

Sweden's Security Policy after Covid-19

By Fredrik Bynander

The pandemic has caused ruptures in how nations view their vulnerabilities and partnerships but also generated new thinking on national and regional security assets. Sweden became the global outlier early in the outbreak—pictured as unconcerned with the spread of the disease, indeed shooting for herd immunity according to some experts and pundits. This image, whether justified or not, came with a cost. Borders with the neighboring Nordics were closed for long periods, its standing in the European Union (EU) arena suffered, and the reputation of this self-proclaimed humanitarian powerhouse took a beating. The national dialogue, especially concerning security and international partnerships, has changed as a result of this “collective trauma.” As light at the end of the tunnel is appearing, new bearings are taken as to improving national readiness, strengthening security, and realignments needed to stay afloat in the trade war that has ensued in a parallel development. The pandemic was a catalyst of many things but perhaps the most lasting will be the need for strategic direction that has not been very pressing since the end of the Cold War. In Sweden that means a revitalized domestic conversation on which of a long list of national interests are truly important in this new era of global turbulence.

Many Ways to be Surprised

The early days of the pandemic were characterized by official declarations of confidence that Swedish disease control would prove effective in containing COVID-19. In February 2020, as vacationers were about to return from the outbreak in Northern Italy, Swedish authorities touted a test-trace-isolate strategy that would make sure that no major outbreak could occur in Sweden. Just days later, the same authorities acknowledged a major domestic outbreak and abandoned testing as part of the countermeasures. The new mantra was to maintain social distance, to refrain from public gatherings, and to avoid public transportation. Rapidly, it became obvious that care homes and other systems for assisting the elderly were being overrun by contagion and intensive care units (ICU) in the Stockholm area were full of seriously ill patients. The death toll had a steep trajectory in contrast with those of neighboring Norway and Finland where tight lockdowns had been imposed. This was to be seen as the most serious failure of the Swedish response.¹ Other major problems were the miniscule

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stockpiles of personal protective equipment (PPE), the slow launch of PCR testing capacity for SARS COV 2, and a national communication effort that left citizens as well as foreign observers confused about Sweden's strategy to deal with the disease.²

Financially, Sweden entered the global turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic with cash on hand—a low sovereign debt, a budget surplus, and a growing economy. The government acted swiftly to reassure national and international markets that financial policies would be swift and extremely expansive. In 2020, the government sent 12 budgets to parliament,³ and vulnerable industries have received massive infusions of capital through government lending. Sweden's GDP returned to pre-pandemic levels in the first quarter of 2021, ahead of many of its northern European peers.⁴ The government will get no credit for “saving the economy over fighting the spread of infection,” but in the final analysis societal stability is a factor.

Initially, as the Wuhan outbreak escalated, the analogies used were based on earlier corona virus epidemics: SARS (2003) and MERS (2014-2015).⁵ Another common assumption was that patterns of infection would be similar to that of a pandemic flu. If any or both of these possibilities were correct, test and trace procedures would stop the spread. As it turned out, COVID-19 was a much more devious contagion that eluded many proven measures and made a mockery of many government responses. Chinese authorities were seen as authoritarian and brutal but effective in their efforts to contain the national outbreak in the Hubei region.⁶ China received some unenthusiastic gratitude as well for its rapid resumption of vital value chains disrupted by the initial outbreak. Taiwan and South Korea also appeared up to the task. Iran and Italy, in contrast, came out as ineffectual and indecisive, and as more Western countries were enveloped in COVID-19, the race to master the pandemic was on, along with a parallel race to develop an effective vaccine.

Sweden's role in this narrative was cast as the lax libertarian society that would beat the infection with a strategy based on trust and voluntary measures.

Leadership

In a situation when national priorities decelerate in the forming are upended by a seemingly existential threat, leadership requirements are placed on people in charge that are quite different from normal demands and that triggers choices and priorities that can be painful. Politicians rise to the top by their ability to promote their party, gain name recognition and popularity, interact with political foes, and sponsor reform. These traits are not very helpful in a situation where tragic choices are made, communicated, and implemented, often over strong objections by vested interests in society. COVID-19 forced political leaders in all democracies to weigh individual freedoms and rights against the risk of an explosive spread of infection; the decline of economic activity against measures that maximize social distancing; survival of some industries at great cost, but not others; communicating clearly without wavering or dodging responsibility under intense criticism. Ultimately, the way a government handles itself in a contingency like this will test the viability of the existing “social contract”—the strength and legitimacy of the state's accountability for citizens' safety and security.

Then-Prime Minister Stefan Löfven reacted to the first pivotal decisions of the pandemic by placing himself firmly behind the assessments and recommendations made by the Swedish Public Health Agency. He stated that Sweden would get through this by relying on scientific knowledge rather than political knee-jerk reactions. For a long time, this proved to be a popular and credible approach, but an accumulation of mistakes, over-optimism and coordination failures undermined the position of the government. The botched effort to protect the elderly and other problems mentioned earlier



"People take a walk in the city. Sweden had no lockdown, only governmental safety instructions regarding how to deal with the coronavirus pandemic." (Malmö, Sweden, June 7, 2020. Photo by: Dan_Manila, Shutterstock ID: 1751899313)

opened the national response up for reproach by influential actors, domestic and foreign. One of the tag-lines launched at the Swedish strategy was that it showed the extent of the deficit in defense readiness of Swedish society. Stockpiles, trained staff, command capacity, and coordination capacity were all areas where the system was found wanting. The Prime Minister and other ministers in charge, such as Minister of the Interior Mikael Damberg, started touting the windfall that was offered to Civil Defense under the recently negotiated deal on total defense spending.

The leadership conundrum was challenging to a Swedish government lacking a majority in parliament, being in coalition with one party, but needing three others to reach 50 percent plus one.

However, the opposition realized the gravity of the moment and saw the legitimacy surge behind the government's strategy and lost its nerve. The government got to call the shots for the first wave of the pandemic and was unchallenged as it constructed an economic rescue package to support ailing businesses and citizens. High profile experts had reservations about the restrictions and challenged the voluntary recommendations that the government and its agencies thought would limit the spread of the disease.⁷ Reliance on the Public Health Agency rather than a society-wide perspective in dealing with the spread was another point of contention domestically and internationally.⁸

One issue that became apparent as results failed to materialize was poor steering by government

agencies as well as by regions and municipalities.⁹ Critical tasks such as procurement of PPE, PCR testing, and preparations for a vaccine campaign were slow and led to attempts at blame shifting by central actors. Directors General of the leading agencies, notably the National Board for Health and Welfare and the Public Health Agency, were summoned to meet the Prime Minister, but their responsibilities shifted and escalated only slowly. It turns out that the modern state's approach to central governance increasingly has become one of oversight, incentivizing, and guidelining, rather than being able to mobilize surge capacity for the system to upscale its operations. This realization was a rude awakening for many decisionmakers.

The European Problem

The more intimate and institutionalized EU cooperation can be seen as a model and platform for Swedish leaders who have found new ways to influence world policy. The United Nations (UN) has long since ceased to be the predominant arena for Swedish security policy influence. In addition, meaningful UN mandates are vulnerable to the structural problems of the Security Council, with recurring veto threats stopping concerted action. The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and informal cooperative structures at the highest level within the EU have become the path to political influence over regional security. The pandemic would challenge this model to its core.

Since EU accession, it has also become increasingly evident that Sweden, more than larger states, has everything to gain from a European/Western consensus. The reasons for this are predominantly the weaker influence of small states in foreign policy disputes between parties that normally cooperate. By siding with stronger states, the small state can marginally affect policy outcomes and create its own freedom of action—something that becomes impossible when the great powers jostle for position

and relegate smaller states like Sweden to the sidelines. The loss of a regular ally, the United Kingdom with Brexit, makes Sweden's position increasingly difficult, as the power balance in the European Council will shift further away from the north European perspective often supported by the UK. The pandemic caused rifts between the EU and the UK in addition to the ones playing out as part of the negotiations on the future relationship. Border issues got thornier, travel restrictions caused tensions and vaccine procurement became a bone of considerable contention. Sweden and the UK probably would have been likeminded on many COVID-19 issues (especially early on) but Sweden's situation became one of splendid isolation in Brussels.



"A sign pointing towards a facility for travelers to take Covid tests." (Stockholm, Sweden April 16, 2021. Photo by: Alexanderstock23)

Sweden has long sought further liberalization of international trade by strengthening the common market, but primarily through a programmatic extension of the European free trade policy with common positions in the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and other international events in the area. The Eastern Partnership was a flagship for Sweden, and its failure has put the entire

Swedish solidarity doctrine in question. The 2014 Russian annexation of the Crimea and its proxy war in eastern Ukraine shows the constraints of the EU's common foreign policy (as well as of other Western efforts at cooperation). The fact that the EU and the United States have been able to create a sanctions regime against Russia over the Crimea issue is absolutely crucial for maintaining the credibility of the Swedish political approach. The EU's common front, however fragile, particularly in light of enlargement and increased political division in the European Council, has been crucial for continued Swedish commitment to the EU as its main foreign policy arena. The recurrent and prolonged financial crises that have affected parts of the Eurozone and the 2015 refugee crisis has put the cohesion of the union in question, which fuels concern about CFSP as well. The pandemic put not only the EU to the test, but Swedish reliance on EU coherence and EU institutions were both found wanting.¹⁰

Influence Operations

Influence operations, propaganda, and information warfare have been on the rise due to the increased great power competition of recent years. Sweden has been the target of Russian and, increasingly, Chinese operations. Sweden's move to increase defense spending and its more confrontational tone toward Russian behavior in the region has come at the cost of increased pressure in the information arena from Kremlin-sanctioned actors. Internal political divisions, discontent with public services and government programs and distrust between groups in societies are all vulnerabilities that Russian propaganda has historically capitalized upon. A number of spats with the Chinese regime have also caused an escalation of Beijing's operations against Sweden. A Swedish citizen of Chinese origin was kidnapped from a hotel in Thailand and brought to China in captivity, resulting in strong Swedish objections. A Swedish talk show host made jokes about Chinese

tourists in Stockholm, which caused outrage from the Chinese embassy in Stockholm. Swedish security agencies recommended the exclusion of Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE from the national 5G auction.¹¹ This has caused recurring expressions of outrage from the Chinese regime, coupled with a growth in information operations.

The situation has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a clear element of competition between states, not only in containing the virus, but also in producing a vaccine, supporting affected countries to influence their policies and thus rewiring existing patterns of cooperation and conflict. Sweden has not been spared attack, especially after it became the poster boy for voluntary measures and "herd immunity." Many actors have a vested interest in Sweden not being seen as successful as tighter lockdown protocols correspondingly would seem like over reactions.

Also, the pandemic has produced strange bedfellows. In the U.S. debate, Sweden was associated with poor integration and lax immigration policies at the start of the Trump presidency—an image that was turned on its head when the anti-lockdown movement on the American political right realized that Sweden seemed to be championing a strategy of open businesses and no face masks in the spring of 2020. Narratives about Sweden in social media changed seemingly overnight as the alt-right and other groups critical of harsh COVID-19 measures tried to influence their own governments across the Western world to adopt less restrictive measures.

COVID-19 and the Total Defense Concept

Since 2015, Sweden has been recommissioning its Cold War concept of total defense—the ambition to plan and prepare for every part of society to engage in a possible war effort. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea demonstrated the reoccurrence of war on the European continent, and the pendulum started

swinging away from the demilitarized threat catalogue and out-of-area military operations of the previous period. As of 2015, the Swedish government, with significant bipartisan support, is rebuilding a territorially focused armed force and a civil defense infrastructure that had recently been thoroughly decommissioned.¹²

The change that was imposed on security policy thinking obviously affected the traditional defense sector, which saw its core functions extended to peace-time threats and international missions to a greater extent than before. Another, and perhaps equally important consequence, was that other sectors of society were included in security policy practice and were assigned functional responsibility for key policy areas to address vulnerabilities and

threats. As COVID-19 hit vital societal systems it became obvious that planning for these systems may have resumed, but nothing material was in place to reinforce the strained capacity of care providers across the country. In Finland, which did not decommission its Cold War total defense system, stockpiles of PPE and other crucial resources such as ventilators were available and quickly deployed. In Sweden, disputes ensued over which public body should handle procurement and whether procurement should be centralized or handled by the regions. A massive military hospital with intensive care units was rapidly organized inside Stockholm's largest convention center. However, Stockholm's health care region could never staff the hospital, and it never saw a single patient.



"The Stockholm Fair Grounds are being turned into a temporary external hospital to handle Covid 19 cases." (Stockholm, Sweden March 27, 2020. Photo by Alexanderstock23, Shutterstock ID: 1685418064)

When scarcity in many equipment areas became obvious, many companies volunteered to convert their production and ramp up delivery of much-needed resources for health care and other affected parts of society. Other corporate actors contacted national authorities to share acquisition opportunities in global markets. Swedish actors in the global pharmaceutical business contacted government actors to offer inroads into the vaccine development processes that were underway in the spring and summer of 2020. Most of these calls went unheeded, however. Sticklers to protocol, committed Europeans and reluctant public-private partners, Swedish government representatives tended to point callers to someone else, refer to the applicable red tape, or declare that budget constraints prohibited any rash procurements. When the National Board of Health got their national procurement center active in mid-March 2020, it was slow to attain the required amounts of goods.¹³ The staff was reinforced by experts from the Armed Forces and the Armed Forces Materiel Administration; organizational cultures clashed and operations remained unimpressive. In short, public authorities in Sweden did not have the adaptability or the readiness to surge capabilities in order to fully address the shortages that COVID-19 caused for the health care system or other critical functions in society.

Further out in the capillaries of the Swedish response, a different story is told. Hospitals across the country adapted and doubled the available ICU beds in a short period. As in many other countries, healthcare professionals carried society's functionality through wave after wave of COVID-19 infection. Bottleneck-clearing functions in the healthcare machinery were reinforced, procedures were adapted to increase the number of treatable patients, and novel solutions were adopted to generate speedier recovery for COVID-19 victims.¹⁴

Defending against military threats requires a capacity by the government to control its

instruments of power to guide society's efforts in a strategic direction. The crisis management system that was built to replace the Cold War total defense program had a bottom-up logic in which local-level actors had the primary responsibility to respond to threats, with superior levels of authority supporting only when necessary. The response to COVID-19 is an illustration that there is no national command system that can be deployed to muster collective, national resources to meet a threat, nor is there sufficient operative know-how in national authorities for them to assume command of a national effort. A government commissioned inquiry investigating this issue reported in March 2021, recommending substantive improvements to this national capability, causing some optimism that more will be done over the coming years in this area.¹⁵

Conclusions

Sweden is a state which for historical and geopolitical reasons existed in Europe's political periphery during the Cold War. When the political upheavals in Eastern Europe began in 1989, the country's prerequisites for pursuing its foreign and security policy changed significantly as the threat from the East was disrupted. The states that had lived under Soviet domination drew immediate lessons from this and undertook radical internal and external reorientations and sought reassurances for their security policies in case the "strategic timeout" was to end. When NATO members also realigned their security perspective beyond Europe, the non-aligned states entered a period of confusing self-examination. For Sweden, the EU was considered to be an opportunity for greater economic prosperity and political involvement in European political structures, without restricting the country's security policy freedom to a large extent. This process was expedited mainly for domestic policy reasons, as there was strong latent opposition on this issue—especially within the single party government in

power at that time. Since then, the security climate of Northern Europe has deteriorated, and pressure has been applied to previously lax strategies to stave off outside threats. The pandemic has been a further catalyst for a reexamination of the security policies of many European states, not least Sweden.

Sweden's post-Cold War grand strategy has been to drive integration-oriented, EU-based solutions to security (and safety) problems and commit to them on an institutional basis to build credibility with friendly states and deter unfriendly ones. The breakdown of EU consensus on core issues with security implications is generally seen as detrimental to the small state—a continued fragmentation right through the core of the Union on foreign and security policy would greatly reduce Swedish influence over broad political issue areas. Brexit has further destabilized Sweden's position in Brussels, as it lost its biggest ally on many security and safety-related issues. When leading EU states are locked in conflicts of interest and thus more overtly pushing their national agendas in the EU, smaller states are robbed of leverage and cannot use compromises in the Council to advance their positions. That is why the failure of the internal market in the face of shortages in the beginning of the pandemic is a major concern, as is the discord between Sweden and the other Nordic states on COVID-19 strategy. Sweden's resistance to the more expansive parts of the 2020 EU recovery plan has further hurt its standing as a constructive player in Brussels. Security after COVID-19 looks a lot more elusive as the small powers are forced into starker choices over trade relations and participation in security initiatives.

For Sweden, this involves the complicated relationship between foreign and domestic policy. The steps toward a regional security policy commitment are surrounded by strong national interests and problematic internal divisions within the leading political parties, not the least in the Social Democratic Party. Choosing the EU path over

NATO toward enhanced security policy cooperation is in this light considerably more attractive for maintaining a measure of national consensus. Crucial to the attraction of this option is the demonstrated ability to find long-term solutions to genuine European problems. Again, the pandemic has cast serious doubt over the future stability of this cooperation. The inclusion of neighboring states in a positive political development, managing refugee flows that will continue across the EU's external border, and not least the strained relations with Russia are all crucial for EU cooperation as a major security policy instrument for the Member States. It can be argued that these tasks are a big ask of any organization that is so loosely composed and internally divided as the EU, and COVID-19 represented a sizable chink in its armor when it comes to security cooperation.

As a member, Sweden has since its accession adopted a role of the fully committed participant of the Brussels arena and as a self-proclaimed equal partner in the European political landscape with the ability to muster support for political solutions at the political level. The various governments have favored the European Union increasingly in international issues because of the simple reason that the total weight of the Member States can really shift political structures at a global level, while the small state has few instruments of power. The problem has rather been not to put too many of the foreign and security policy eggs in the European basket. In the event of a collapse in the consensus on sanctions against Russia—for example—few effective unilateral Swedish tools remain. Eastern and Central European members are increasingly threatening Union coherence on these issues. The pandemic has furthered suspicion that Russian influence over member states' policies and positions in Brussels will continue to rise and threaten paralysis, especially in a future crisis of the same magnitude as COVID-19. A community policy failure in this

regard would for Sweden trigger an awakening from the beautiful world of the common security strategies and would risk throwing the political debate in an isolationist direction and/or renew the debate on NATO accession. It's not easy to be a small country on a troubled continent. **PRISM**

Notes

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