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Will Sweden become a net consumer of security – or will Svea wake up and seek to assume its traditional role as a stabilizing power in the Baltic Sea?

Sweden is viewed as contributing positively to environmental, societal and trade cooperation in the Baltic region, and the destabilizing nature of its security and defence policies is often ignored. In order to play a positive role in regional security, Sweden must ensure that its defence policy and military posture are aligned.

A politically more assertive and militarily more capable Russia combined with the stated US policy of rebalancing its political and military focus between Europe and Asia has caused significant concern in northern Europe, particularly among countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. These concerns are amplified by a strengthening trend of regional destabilization in terms of defence and security policy.

Because Sweden is generally viewed as contributing positively to environmental, societal and trade cooperation in the region, the destabilizing nature of its security and defence policies is frequently ignored. In order to once again play a positive role in regional security, Sweden must reassess its policies, and ensure that its defence policy and military posture are aligned, not at odds with each other.

For the rest of Europe, the European Union, NATO and its North American members, this instability is not inconsequential. The Baltic Sea region is of strategic importance. Only the straits of Hormuz and Malacca surpass it in terms of volume of energy transports. During the past six months the region has also hosted more large-scale military exercises than any other region in the world: in addition to Steadfast Jazz 2013, NATO's biggest collective defence exercise in many years, all of the Baltic Sea countries have actively participated in a diverse range of multinational exercises involving hundreds of thousands of soldiers. The exercises are part of a broader political game, the objective of which is to rebuild stability around the Baltic Sea. Perhaps predictably, however, the efforts aim to achieve stability at different points of the equilibrium.

The fact that Sweden finds itself cast as one of the causes of Baltic Sea instability is unexpected. Sweden's centuries-long rule over much of Scandinavia laid the groundwork for the Nordic security community. During the Cold War, Sweden's official neutrality and substantial and capable military provided a strong stabilizing influence in the region. Sweden's open assistance to the newly sovereign Baltic states in the 1990s contributed to stability and eventually led to membership of either the European Union or NATO for all but one Baltic Sea littoral state.

The primary reason why Sweden finds itself in an unusual position is the increasing gap between its stated security policy and its military capabilities. The ongoing process of radically altering its defence forces has been persistently underfunded. For example, the Navy lacks proper air defences for its most modern ships, and the air force has excellent fighter aircraft but no long-range air-to-ground capability. The army has practically been gutted, has limited equipment, and is struggling to meet all of its recruitment goals. Air defence (ground-to-air) capability is minimal. Fundamentally, Sweden no longer has a military capable of defending itself or securing the Baltic Sea around it.

This has prompted increasing talk of a security vacuum in the region, and has led to a lively public debate about defence policy. Baltic Sea littoral states are aware that while the Swedish 'Solidarity Declaration' is a strong sign of political commitment if a neighbour is threatened or attacked, Sweden has very little military capability to send abroad during an escalating regional crisis; intelligence gathering is, however, something Sweden could contribute to in a meaningful way.

The fact that Sweden expects similar solidarity from its neighbours is understandable, but to base the country's security policy on this undoubtedly involves accepting serious risks.

The political expectation of external assistance has been built into Sweden's defence reform, but even

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if the underfunded reform is completed, Sweden's ability to receive support will be limited. The current Swedish government is beginning to recognize the damaging effect that both its own, and its predecessors' defence policies are having on regional stability, but while slightly increased defence appropriations are likely, membership of the only organization that could fulfill the expectation of the solidarity declaration in return – NATO – is still not officially under consideration.

Being party to the destabilization trend in the Baltic Sea region does not fit its self-image, but Sweden can take steps to alter this trend.

First, Sweden must fund its defence reform properly. It should continue to seek opportunities to more closely bind Finland to efforts relating to mutual defence or its de facto variant: mutual/joint/shared ownership of expensive and critical capabilities. This could include asking defence experts to develop a blueprint for shared defence between the countries, potentially kick-starting a public debate based on a concrete proposal.

Finally, unless Swedish politicians are ready to significantly increase the country's investment in security spending, they should move to authorize a study looking into the potential impacts of Swedish NATO membership. These and other public actions would be a sign that both government and opposition leaders have understood the ongoing negative impacts their defence and security policies are having on others in the Baltic Sea region.

Finnish politicians should carefully consider what lessons they can draw from Sweden's experiences.

A country that for centuries had contributed to regional stability has become a consumer of security in less than half a decade. Ideologies regarding international politics, extreme efficiency, outsourcing, privatization, all-volunteer forces and the like have all influenced the development of armed forces around the world, as well as in Sweden and Finland; the reality is that any application of these across national borders is fraught with danger. Finnish politicians would do well to remember this, and to acknowledge that Finland has only ever successfully defended itself when it has received outside assistance. The decisions that today's politicians make during the next five years will impact Finnish security for decades.