



Finding its way in EU security and defence cooperation: A view from Sweden

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Abstract

This article addresses Sweden's more ambitious and forward-looking approach to EU security and defence cooperation. This approach represents, in part, an adaptation by Sweden to the post-Brexit political landscape. However, Stockholm is also reacting to the more ambitious policy initiatives coming out of Brussels. This article will look at some of the major developments and initiatives on the EU level and discuss how Sweden has reacted and tried to influence them. It argues that 2021 could be another watershed year for EU security and defence cooperation as the process of developing the Union's new Strategic Compass is in a formative phase. It concludes that it is welcome news that Stockholm is raising its level of ambition and actively attempting to influence this process.

Keywords

Sweden, EU, CSDP, Strategic Compass, EPF, PESCO, EDF

Introduction

Since the 2016 Global Strategy, the EU has developed a number of new security and defence initiatives—and with this, the long list of defence acronyms has steadily grown. At a time when Sweden is actively rebuilding its territorial defence, it has also started pursuing a more active and pragmatic approach towards the EU's new security and defence policy agenda. As underlined by defence minister Peter Hultqvist, 'the Swedish government will continue our two-track policy: to strengthen our national defence posture over the coming years and to deepen our international defence cooperation' (Hultqvist 2021). Nevertheless, in the post-Brexit political landscape, Sweden has at times struggled to find its way within the EU.

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This article outlines some of the major developments and initiatives on the EU level and describes how Sweden has reacted and tried to influence them. It also discusses how Stockholm is now trying to find a more forward-looking and ambitious approach to EU security and defence cooperation. It argues that Sweden's active engagement in the development of EU foreign and security policy is necessary and should be welcomed. The article mainly builds on interviews with officials and policymakers in the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of Defence (MoD), and in the prime minister's office, as well as with members of the Swedish parliament and representatives from the country's defence industry.¹

Sweden's ambition to belong to the core of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy

The Swedish government has recently emphasised that 'the EU is our most important foreign and security policy arena. No other actor is a greater guarantor of Sweden's economy, security and peace. Sweden will participate fully in EU cooperation and in shaping it in a way that safeguards Sweden's interests' (Government of Sweden 2020d). The emphasis on the EU as the country's most important security policy arena is something new and a clear signal that Stockholm has raised its level of ambition.

Sweden is coming from a position where it has traditionally been close to the UK and rather sceptical of the EU's institutional development in the field of security and defence. However, this position is starting to change as the UK's departure from the EU is forcing Sweden to rethink many of its concerns and beliefs (see e.g. Fägersten et al. 2018). Today Sweden's ambition is to have a more forward-looking position that would give the country more influence on the development of EU policies. Consequently, it aims to belong to the core of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. It wants to be one of the member states that put forward proposals, and to be seen as an important partner that other member states and the European External Action Service consult and involve in the policy process.² This new approach should be regarded, in part, as an adaptation by Sweden to the post-Brexit political landscape.

(New) formats of defence cooperation outside the EU

For Stockholm it is also important that EU security and defence cooperation complements and is mutually reinforcing with the work of NATO and Sweden's other regional, bilateral and multilateral defence formats. While Sweden is not a member of NATO, it has developed and deepened its cooperation with the alliance. Since 2014 it has been an Enhanced Opportunities Partner of NATO (Government of Sweden 2020c). In recent years it has also strengthened its bilateral relations with large European countries such as the UK and France, in part by participating in new multilateral frameworks such as the UK's Joint Expeditionary Force and the French-led European Intervention Initiative (EI2) (Herolf and Håkansson 2020). In 2021 Sweden will host the EI2's annual ministerial meeting (Government of Sweden 2020a). To further strengthen its security and

defence policy relations with France, Swedish special forces will participate in the new French-led task force Takuba in Mali in 2021 (Government of Sweden, 2020C).

Finding the right balance in the Strategic Compass

One of the new EU policy initiatives is the ‘Strategic Compass’ process. It aims to ‘strengthen a common European security and defence culture and help define the right objectives and concrete goals for our policies’ (EEAS 2020; see also e.g. Nováky 2020; Fiott 2020; Koenig 2020; Molenaar 2021). For Sweden it is very important to find the right balance between the EU’s civilian and military dimensions. Sweden will focus on this in the Strategic Compass process, where it will underline the importance of viewing security from a broad perspective. Stockholm advocates a holistic and whole-of-government approach within the Strategic Compass process, according to which both foreign and defence ministers—and at times also interior and justice ministers—need to be involved because of the different security threats the EU is facing today. One of Sweden’s focus areas in the Strategic Compass will consequently be developing and improving the work of the nexus between internal and external security.³

Another of Sweden’s top priorities for the EU is to find a balance between the military and civilian sides of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Sweden has long been a promoter of EU civilian crisis management. Together with Finland, the country worked actively to establish the civilian CSDP in the early 2000s (Björkdahl 2008; Jakobsen 2009). Moreover, together with Germany and backed by other Nordic countries, Sweden took the initiative to strengthen the EU’s civilian crisis management structures and thus promoted the Civilian CSDP Compact in 2018. This compact forms the EU’s new framework for civilian crisis management. Its objectives are to enhance the effectiveness of civilian CSDP missions and to strengthen the EU’s ability to respond to threats across the internal–external nexus (Council of the European Union 2018).

As concerns the implementation of the EU Global Strategy, Sweden has persistently argued that the military and civilian dimensions of the CSDP need to be strengthened in a balanced manner. For this reason, it welcomed and strongly supported the launch of the Civilian CSDP Compact.⁴ Consequently, the civilian component of the CSDP will be another of Stockholm’s top priorities for the Strategic Compass. Furthermore, the Civilian CSDP Compact should be fully implemented by 2023, when Sweden holds the EU Presidency. Thus, it will be an area of focus in the time leading up to the Swedish Presidency and during the Presidency itself.⁵

Another aspect of the Strategic Compass that will be discussed is the EU’s mutual assistance clause (Article 42(7)). Sweden developed its own unilateral declaration of solidarity, which is extended to the EU and the Nordic countries; but thus far it has been rather reluctant to discuss the operationalisation of Article 42(7). Nevertheless, there have been some new initiatives in the past couple of years. For instance, during the 2019 Finnish EU Presidency, Article 42(7) was tested through a hybrid exercise, and the EU

institutions have also produced various scoping papers on the subject (Engberg 2021). The defence ministers of Germany, France, Italy and Spain have also stressed the importance of working on the operationalisation of Article 42(7) through regular scenario-based discussions, war games and exercises, which should cover all possible worst-case crisis scenarios (Government of France 2020). The discussions on the EU's mutual assistance clause will consequently continue during the work on the Strategic Compass, and France is expected to seek a political declaration on the subject during its 2022 EU Presidency (Quencez and Besch 2020; Engberg 2021). Thus, it is clear that Stockholm needs to find a more active role in this process.

Finally, in regard to the formal decision-making process within the EU, Sweden now supports the use of qualified majority voting in certain aspects of the Union's foreign policymaking (Government of Sweden 2019). Moreover, in the past couple of years, the EU has launched smaller and fewer CSDP missions, and some new missions have been organised in informal 'coalition of the willing' groupings outside the framework of the EU. Hence, both decision-making procedures and the EU's ambition to develop and launch new military and civilian CSDP missions should be thoroughly discussed during the Strategic Compass process.

The EU and partnerships

Another issue that is currently being discussed in Sweden is how to connect the UK to the EU's and Sweden's foreign and security policies. Most other European states have a formal connection to the UK through NATO, but since Brexit Sweden has been without a link of this kind. The new Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the UK and the EU is now in place, but it does not address the field of security and defence. The Swedish government intends to enter into dialogue with the UK on how the bilateral security policy relationship can be developed (Government of Sweden 2020c).

Discussions are currently underway on establishing a European Security Council to connect the UK and the EU on foreign, security and defence policy issues (see e.g. Nováky 2019; Macron 2019). Sweden, however, considers this a risky undertaking as decision-making would fall (even more) into the hands of the larger states.⁶ However, if the EU and the UK cannot find an institutional set-up for foreign and security policy discussions, there is also the risk that even more coordination of foreign and security policy will instead be carried out by the E3 group of France, Germany and the UK (for recent discussions on this format, see e.g. Billon-Galland et al. 2020; Brattberg 2020; Wieslander 2020). A mid-sized nation such as Sweden would then risk losing influence on the decision-making process.

With a view to strengthening partnerships, the EU has also developed the new €5 billion off-budget European Peace Facility (EPF). This means that the EU should for the first time be able to supply partners with 'assistance measures, which may include the supply of military and defence related equipment' (Council of the European Union

2020).⁷ Sweden long objected to the EPF, arguing that the EU's capability to provide munitions for combat is a very sensitive issue. Sweden holds that assistance measures need to be preceded by proper risk and impact analyses, and that there must be proper safeguards and rules on the handling and storage of munitions. These points were incorporated in the EPF, which meant that Sweden could support it. Sweden also has the right to constructively abstain when decisions are being made on assistance measures. In such cases money from the abstaining country is not to be used for those measures, something that was important for Sweden in the negotiations.⁸

The EU's quest for strategic autonomy: a Swedish view

The discussions on strategic autonomy intensified after the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which underlined the EU's need to take greater responsibility for its own security. Over time the scope of these discussions has expanded. Today the concept has a broader meaning that encompasses, among other things, security and defence issues, trade and economic policy, health issues, climate and digitalisation (Helwig 2020). For its part, Sweden has been rather reluctant to embrace the idea. Swedish Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist, for instance, has stated that the country 'opposes European Strategic Autonomy in industrial terms' (Riksdagen 2019). Sweden has actively sought to nuance the ways in which 'strategic autonomy' is used in Council conclusions. Scepticism towards the concept is also found in many parts of the Swedish political system.⁹ The Swedish government has thus recently argued that strategic autonomy should not mean 'that the EU closes itself to the outside world or reduces cooperation with partner countries. . . . The transatlantic relationship should be safeguarded' (Government of Sweden 2020b). Nevertheless, Sweden is now trying to engage more actively and pragmatically with the idea.¹⁰ As put by Sweden's Minister for EU Affairs Hans Dahlgren: 'in some areas, strategic autonomy must be protected without the EU turning inwards' (Government of Sweden 2021).

EU defence industrial cooperation

New EU initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) are major developments which have revitalised EU defence cooperation. However, Sweden's defence industrial base is privately owned, in part by entities outside the EU. This, together with the country's close industrial and political connections to the US and the UK, has put some strain on the Swedish industry in connection with these new initiatives. Entities owned by third states can now formally participate within the framework of both the EDF and the PESCO, which is something that Sweden has actively and strongly pushed for in the negotiations.¹¹ Nevertheless, part of the Swedish defence industry is concerned that it will be at a disadvantage when it comes to taking part in these initiatives, due to its specific ownership structures, enhanced financial risks and greater administrative burdens.¹² In recent years Sweden has also strengthened its industrial cooperation with the UK. And it has recently signed a new trilateral memorandum of understanding with the UK and Italy in connection with the

development of the Future Combat Air System Cooperation (*Janes* 2021). Thus, large-scale Swedish industrial participation in both PESCO and the EDF is still uncertain.

Conclusion

Since the process of developing the EU's new Strategic Compass is in the formative phase, 2021 could be another watershed year for EU security and defence cooperation. Thus, it is welcome news that Sweden is raising its level of ambition and actively engaging in this process. However, it is still unclear whether the country will succeed in getting the other member states to agree to its political priorities for the Strategic Compass. Furthermore, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced the discussions on strategic autonomy, and Stockholm is trying to adjust to this new political landscape. Finally, the 'no deal' outcome for foreign and security policy between the EU and the UK poses political, military and industrial challenges for Sweden. As a result, Stockholm will continue to work towards connecting the UK and the EU as closely as possible while also developing its bilateral security and defence relations with Britain.

Notes

1. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.
2. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, January 2021.
3. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, January 2021.
4. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, 2019.
5. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, January 2021.
6. Interviews with an official at the Swedish MFA and a Member of the Swedish Parliament, January 2021.
7. The Council has reached a political agreement on the EPF, but a formal decision is expected during the spring of 2021.
8. Interview with an official at the Swedish MFA, January 2021.
9. Interviews with officials at the prime minister's office and with Members of the Swedish Parliament, January 2021.
10. Interviews with officials at the prime minister's office, February 2021.
11. Interviews with officials at the Swedish MFA and MoD, February 2020 and January 2021.
12. Interviews with representatives of Swedish defence industries, January 2021.

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