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Swedish and Finnish strategies in a historical context

Abstract

It is not easy for small countries to form long term security strategies. In most cases they are dependent on the policies pursued great powers. Both possible opponents or allies.

My intention is try to describe how Swedish and Finnish strategies have developed during the last two hundred years depending on how the security environment has changed. In the Finnish case the last hundred years. Last year (2017) Finland celebrated its one hundred years as an independent state.

I will end by commenting on the strategic choices both countries have today and how historical experiences might influence their decisions.

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It is not easy for small countries to form long term security strategies. In most cases they are dependent on the policies pursued great powers. Both possible opponents or allies.

Their own (small countries) possibilities to influence the strategic environment are limited. Events outside their control can drastically change their freedom of action. Sometimes forcing them to abruptly change their strategic concepts. This said, geography and trade relations should not be forgotten as factors influencing strategic decisions. Today also public opinion has to be taken into account when countries, at least democracies, are making strategic decisions.

Developments during the last five years have put Sweden and Finland in a situation where they are being forced to rethink their security concepts, perhaps abandoning earlier strategies. Often a painful process as historical experiences, regardless how relevant they are, tend to play at least as great a role as new facts when deciding on what kind of strategy might be most beneficial for a country.

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I will end by commenting on the strategic choices both countries have today and how historical experiences might influence their decisions.

I will mainly cover what might be called “hard security”.

If I start with the Swedish case.

During the last years of the Napoleonic wars, when Sweden lost Finland to Russia and also lost its territories in northern Germany, it was quite obvious that Sweden had become a marginalised player in European politics.

The then Swedish crown prince, the French Marshall Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, saw this very clearly and initiated what is called the 1812 policy where Sweden changed its traditional view of friends and foes and accepted Russia’s dominant role in the Baltic Sea region as a fact, and that Sweden would have to live with that.

This might be called the beginning of Swedish “Neutrality Policy” - try to keep out of great power politics on the continent.

The first formal neutrality declaration was made in 1834 in connection with rising tensions between Russia and Great Britain. In explaining his policies Jean Baptiste Bernadotte, now king Charles XIV, said that Sweden's (and Norway's, at that time in a union with Sweden) geographical position, almost being an island on the periphery of Europe, and the need to preserve good connections with both Russia and Britain made it possible and but also demanded a policy of strict neutrality.¹⁾

The need for good connections with both great powers rested on Britain's role as Sweden's main trading partner while Russia was the dominant military power in the Baltic Sea region.

The next big test for the Swedish neutrality doctrine came with the Crimean war 1853-56. An important part of the war took place in the Baltic Sea where French and British naval forces threatened St Petersburg. Although Sweden formally remained neutral it has to be considered as a watershed when it comes to relations with Russia.

The French and British navies were allowed to use Fårösund as a base for their operations in the Baltic Sea. During the war the some two hundred war ships used this harbour at different occasions.

Russia protested against this breach of Swedish neutrality and demanded that Sweden should take action against the French and the British. The main reason for Sweden not doing so was that the king regarded it to be in the best interest of Sweden if Russian power in the region could be reduced. Sweden even considered joining the war on the French/British side. The second reason for not taking action, protecting its neutrality with military means, was the deplorable state of the Swedish armed forces. Or as the Swedish Foreign Minister at the time, Gustav Stierneld, expressed it "You can't lock the door if you don't have a key" and "The British will never respect a defence based on words".²⁾

After the Crimean war there was a period when different options were considered to balance the increasing power of Russia. One option that was considered was a Nordic "defence union" between Sweden/Norway and Denmark. That idea had to be shelved in connection with the Danish – Prussian war 1864. Denmark and Sweden were facing different threats. Some initiatives were also taken to get French support in case of a war with Russia but they ended up in nothing.

From around 1870 Sweden returned to its earlier policy of strict neutrality in case of a war between European great powers. In the late 19th century and early 20th Sweden also started a quite extensive armaments program to increase its military capabilities with the aim to be able to withstand pressure from belligerent parties in a European conflict. Conscription was introduced 1901.

The Hague conferences 1899 and 1907 were also seen as tools for small states to protect their interests against great powers. Arbitration and international law was becoming a strategic tool.

When the First World War started Sweden declared itself neutral. The war created surprisingly few challenges to the chosen policy. All the belligerents complained at different occasions regarding Swedish trade policy and the mining of the inlets to the Baltic Sea, but on the whole no one saw any great advantages in putting strong pressure on Sweden to join the war. Geographically Sweden was also on the side line. There was not much to be gained by using Swedish territory.

The interwar years created new ideas concerning which strategic choices Sweden had. After drastically reducing its armed forces and some inconclusive thinking during the twenties two lines of thought emerged. One was that Sweden should continue its traditional neutralist policy based on a strong national defence. Another was that Sweden should rely more on international solidarity within the framework of the League of Nations. As a part of this line of thought, plans were considered where Sweden would help Finland in case of a Russian attack according to article 16 in the charter of the League of Nations. Although there were some plans drawn up for possible cooperation regarding the Åland islands in the Baltic in the end the neutralist line became the preferred solution.

When the Second World War started Sweden's strategic situation was very different from the one that existed at the beginning of the First World War. Instead of the two great powers in the Baltic Sea region, Russia and Germany, being at war with each other, giving Sweden some room to manoeuvre, they were now allies. The first test of this new situation came when Russia attacked Finland in the autumn of 1939. Although there was some debate to help Finland to defend the Åland islands, which would mean active military measures on behalf of Sweden, that came to nothing.³⁾

On the other hand Sweden did not declare itself neutral in the war between Russia and Finland, as it had done when Germany attacked Poland in September. During the "Winter War" Sweden gave substantial assistance to Finland, both when it comes to weapons and volunteers.

One can always speculate if Russia would have attacked Finland if there had been a formal and credible military alliance between Sweden and Finland. That we don't know.

The second test came when Germany invaded Denmark and Norway in April 1940. That Sweden would help to defend its Nordic neighbours was out of the question. Sweden didn't have the military means. Had it also been attacked at that time it would have had very limited possibilities to defend even its own territory.

An interesting illustration of that how smaller countries are viewed by the belligerents in a great power conflict might be Churchill's idea in April 1940 to draw Sweden in to the war on the Scandinavian Peninsula just to tie down German resources. He was fully aware that Britain could not render any help and that Sweden would lose such a war. 4)

The rest of the war became a balancing act between the warring parties. On one hand appeasing Germany by allowing using the Swedish railway system to support its troops in Norway and Finland and providing it with iron ore and other raw materials. And at the same time trying to have reasonably good relations with the allies to be able to import essential goods as oil. Neutrality as a doctrine was stretched to the limits and beyond. The overriding goal was to keep Sweden out of the war, at (nearly) whatever it costs.

It should be noted that Sweden's freedom of action increased from 1943 and onwards when Germany started to run into problems and Swedish defence capabilities increased due to an ambitious rearmaments program. From 1938 to 1942 the defence budget increased from approximately 2% of GDP to more than 10% of GDP.⁵⁾ This created possibilities to become firmer towards Germany and to appease the allies.

A lesson that might be learnt from this is that rearmament takes time. The programs that were initiated at the beginning of the Second World War were not fully implemented before 1947. Or to say it in another way, if your own military capabilities are an essential part of your strategy they can't be improvised in a short time.

Soon after the Second World War the old idea of a Nordic defence alliance between Sweden, Denmark and Norway was raised again. It was obvious that no country could face the new strategic environment with a mighty Soviet Union as a neighbour on its own.

While Sweden was very keen on this idea, Norway and Denmark came to the conclusion that only membership of NATO could balance the Soviet threat.

Sweden chose to return to its neutrality policy. This time backed by a strong military. Some 10% of the population had different war time assignments. The armed forces consisted of some 700,000 people. The strategic idea behind this was called the "marginal doctrine". An aggressor, in this case the Soviet Union, would have to allocate so many resources to conquer Sweden that it would affect its capabilities to fight the main enemy, NATO.

This Swedish strategic choice was also influenced by Finland's precarious situation. It was feared that if Sweden joined NATO the Soviet Union might occupy Finland and thereby putting Sweden in a still more dangerous position.

This said, it was equally clear that Sweden would need help if attacked by the Soviet Union. Despite all declarations of aiming to be neutral in a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact Sweden prepared a fall back option by making quite extensive, secret preparations to receive help from NATO.⁶⁾ The strong defence that was needed to make the "marginal doctrine" credible was also an important tool to convince NATO that it was worthwhile and possible to support Sweden if necessary.

The end of the Cold War created a totally new situation. There were no more any powers to be neutral between. Although it involved a lot of soul searching Sweden abandoned its neutrality policy in 1994 by joining the EU. Article 42.7 in the Lisbon Treaty makes it quite clear that members of the union are supposed to support each other in case of being attacked. Neutrality as a strategy is not an option any more, at least not in principle; - although reality might be different.

To summarize nearly two hundred years of Swedish strategy it can mainly be described as trying to stay out of wars by being neutral in great power conflicts. In later stages of the period a strong defence was also regarded as a prerequisite in pursuing this policy. Although it sometimes involved a bit of luck and quite a lot of flexibility, or rather appeasement, to wish that the at the moment dominating power is proved to be a successful strategy.

Before I comment possible future Swedish (and Finnish) strategies, and how history plays a role in today's deliberations, I will shortly describe which choices Finland has had during the last hundred years and how they might influence present Finnish thinking.

Finnish strategies have developed along very different lines compared with Sweden. The country has had to fight three wars during the last hundred years, all of them threatening the existence of the country.

In the Finnish War of Independence 1917-1918 Finland asked for, and got help from Germany. Although it wasn't a formal military alliance it nevertheless created problems at the end of the First World war when Finland tried to establish friendly relations with the victors.

General, later Marshall Mannerheim, the commander of the Finnish army foresaw this and advocated that Finland should gain its independence without foreign help. He was overruled.⁷⁾

Russia has always been, and will probably always be, the main factor in Finnish strategic thinking. With a common land border of approximately 1.300 km with a great power keen to dominate its “near abroad” and limited possibilities to receive foreign help due to its geographic location Finland has had few choices other than trying to have good relations with Russia and at the same time making it credible that it can and will defend itself.

There were discussions with Sweden in the late thirties to cooperate in case of war, especially when it came to defend the Åland islands.⁸) Strategically situated separating the Baltic Sea from the Gulf of Bothnia. A way to protect the Finnish West Coast and parts of the Swedish East coast.

The consequences of Finland’s limited strategic options became clear when Germany and the Soviet Union carved up the Baltic region between themselves with the Molotov - Ribbentrop agreement 1939. The balancing factor of possible German, at least political, support to Finland disappeared.

When Russia attacked Finland in November 1939 Finland was alone. Although Finland was outmanned and outgunned it managed to fight more than three months against a vastly superior enemy. Long enough for other factors, mainly deteriorating British and French relations with the Soviet Union, to come into play.

In the Continuation War, 1941–1944, where Finland joined forces with Germany, Finland was quite cautious regarding occupying Soviet territory. Very intentionally Finland did not attack Soviet vital strategic interests as the Murmansk railway line and Leningrad. General (later Marshall) Mannerheim, the commander of the Finnish armed forces and the man who de facto guided Finnish strategic decisions strongly opposed policies that could be connected with Germany’s war goals.⁹)

Finland also avoided signing a formal military alliance with Germany. They were just co-belligerents against a common enemy.

In 1944 Finland made a strategic U-turn that very probably saved its independence. In need of strong German support to stop the Soviet offensive in June 1944 it signed a formal treaty with Germany, receiving the much needed help, mainly anti-tank weapons and air support. After having stopped the Soviet offensive, thereby gaining a better bargaining position, Finland annulled the treaty with Germany and signed an armistice with the Soviet Union. Among other clauses Finland was obliged to expel all German troops from its territory, some 300,000 men, mainly in northern Finland. Finland went to war against its former ally Germany.

After the war Finland was in a precarious situation but managed to keep its independence very much by creating reasonable relations with Russia but perhaps also due to the respect it had gained in the Soviet Union by fighting so successfully.

In 1948 Finland signed a treaty of “Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance” with the Soviet Union. The treaty was to deter Western Powers from attacking the Soviet Union through Finnish territory. In case of such a threat emerging Finland was obliged to enter consultations with the Soviet Union. In reality meaning that Finland would receive Soviet “military help” whether it wanted it or not. At the same time the treaty increased Finland's political independence from the Soviet Union by recognising Finland's desire to remain outside great-power conflicts, allowing the country to adopt a policy of neutrality in the Cold War. Although the treaty was an important instrument to preserve Finland's independence it also limited Finland's freedom of action. All actions that could be interpreted as possible cooperation with nations threatening the Soviet Union could lead to negative consequences for Finland.

When the Cold War ended Finland quickly used the situation to annul the treaty in 1991. Finland was quick to use this opportunity to realign its security policy. In 1994 it decided to join the European Union and it has very clearly shown its intentions to be a part of the “western camp” by redirecting its purchases of military equipment from the Soviet Union/Russia to instead buying systems common in NATO. American F-18 Hornets and German Leopard tanks being perhaps the most obvious examples. Finland also joined PfP in 1994.

Finland's historical experiences differ very much from those of Sweden. The most important one perhaps being that a country can be drawn in to a war regardless of its own policies. The second one being that foreign help can't be taken for granted regardless how worthy your cause is, you have to have a reasonably capability to defend yourself, not just as a deterrence but also to gain time for the strategic environment to change if you are drawn in to a war. When assessing your own strategic options you also have to have the strategic interests of neighbouring great powers in mind.

Then, where do we stand today. Which strategic choices do Sweden and Finland have?

The main reason to rethink present strategies is of course Russia's increased assertiveness during the last five to ten years, its growing military might and its preparedness to use military force to achieve political goals.

In the Swedish case there are two main concerns. What would it mean if Russia took some kind of action in the Baltic States creating a situation where NATO would have to defend them? Secondly what

if Russia would see a need to expand its security zone around the Murmansk base complex on the Kola Peninsula? The main basing area for Russians second strike capability and also the staging area for Russian naval forces from where they could threaten NATO's lines of communications across the Atlantic. A reemerging threat now when the US again is preparing a "Reforger" concept for Europe.

When it comes to the Baltic States NATO would need to use Swedish territory, especially airspace, to defend them. And will no doubt also do that. That Sweden would try to oppose that with military means is out of the question. This is of course equally clear to Russian planners. If Russia could deploy long range air defence and anti-ship systems on Swedish territory it would mean that NATO's possibilities to support the Baltic States would be drastically reduced. They (the Baltic States) would for all practical purposes be cut off from their allies, giving Russia a more or less free hand to conduct military operations in the Baltic Sea region without too much interference from NATO.

Sweden's possibilities to keep out of a conflict in the Baltic Sea region are minimal.

The obvious conclusion being that Sweden ought to do its utmost to help to increase NATO's possibilities to deter Russia from any actions in the Baltic States.

Here it should also be taken into account that Sweden is a member of the EU and totally dependent on trade with EU/NATO countries to survive economically.

The question then arises why isn't Sweden already a member of NATO and why hasn't it a military capable of making it difficult and risky for Russia to "borrow" Swedish territory in case of a conflict in the region. It would not just make it easier for NATO to operate in the region; it would also make it more probable that Sweden would get help in case being attacked. But most importantly it would raise the threshold for any Russian military adventures in the region; thereby increasing both stability in the region as a whole as well as increasing Sweden's own security.

Here history and public opinion comes in to play showing that strategy is not just a set of objective factors that have to be assessed regarding how they influence strategic choices. Regardless of the new security environment and its implications it seems improbable that Sweden will join NATO in the foreseeable future. The latest opinion polls (January 2018) show that 43% of the population is for a NATO membership, 37% against and 20% undecided.¹⁰ The parties on the political left, representing about half the electorate, are against NATO either on emotional grounds, as a matter of principle or basing their thinking on outmoded historical analogies. "Neutrality has saved Sweden from war the last two hundred years; therefore it must be a good strategy". I might add that this way of thinking is not just something that prevails among left leaning people. The costly part of the earlier neutrality

concept, keeping a capable military organisation, are also forgotten or not mentioned. At the moment (2018) Sweden spends just 1% of GDP on defence.

This said, there is a very lively defence debate in Sweden where large segments of the population, more than 50%, demand increased defence capabilities, regardless if they are in favour of NATO or not.¹¹) The political answer so far has been twofold, to make some very modest increases in defence spending and to offer closer cooperation with Finland as some kind of substitute for a NATO membership. In the latter case even hinting that the two countries might conduct military operations together in case they are attacked.

Somehow it gives you a feeling of *dèjà vu*, didn't we have the same discussion in 1938 and 1939? The question that arises is, will such cooperation increase Sweden's security? To some extent it will. If both countries are attacked simultaneously then Russia would have to face the combined military assets of Sweden and Finland making operations more complicated and risky.

The great flaw in this concept is that, as long as Finland and Sweden are not bound by a military treaty guaranteeing mutual assistance, there is no assurance that they will go to war of the same reasons. Will Finland go to war against Russia to support Sweden if Russia demands to borrow the strategically situated Swedish island of Gotland? Long range missile systems deployed there would dominate the sea and air space over the whole Baltic Sea. Would Sweden go to war against Russia if it made similar demands to borrow parts of Northern Finland to increase the protection zone around Murmansk?

Neither government will sign a treaty containing guarantees of that kind. Such promises would not be credible. This also makes it impossible to develop military organisations that are dependent on each other, even if it would make good sense economically and operationally. You will never know if an asset that the other country is supposed to deliver really will be available.

This last factor probably plays an important role in Finnish deliberations, both when it comes to cooperation with Sweden, but also probably also when it comes to joining NATO.

The Finnish historic experience is very clear. Foreign help can't be taken for granted and that too close ties with competing great powers makes it more difficult to adapt to new strategic circumstances. Moreover, geography being what it is, when considering different strategic options it would be foolish not to consider how Russia might interpret different Finnish choices.

Finland's remarkable achievement to defend itself against an overwhelming opponent, not only once, but twice, probably also has some influence on Finnish thinking, at least among parts of the public. The

near death experiences from 1940 and 1944 are, if not forgotten, to a certain degree replaced by memories of the heroic achievements by the Finnish armed forces. “Why shouldn’t we be able to repeat that, if need be, the Russians know that and they will think twice before they attack us - if we have a credible military”.

To back up the present policy of “non-dependence” combined with deterrence Finland has, by European standards, a remarkably strong military. Today its armed forces can mobilise some 230,000 soldiers, a figure that is planned to increase to 280,000. It has more than 600 artillery pieces and it has recently modernised its inventory of long range munitions fired both from the ground and from aircraft creating a capability to hit targets deep inside Russian territory.¹²) Finland also has a well organised civil defence organisation and has made provisions for surviving for quite a long time even if there would be disruptions in its trade with the outside world. I doubt if any country in Europe is better prepared for a possible war than Finland. At the same time it is obvious that Finland alone could withstand a large scale attack from Russia, at least not for a longer time.

Apart from historical experiences, real ones and some bordering to mythology, both being good as well as dangerous tools to assess new strategic challenges, what factors has Finland to take in to account when formulating a strategy for today’s world?

The perhaps most important one is that from a Russian point of view parts of Finnish territory is a buffer to protect Russia’s installations on the Kola peninsula, naval as well as air bases. Here Russia has two options. Either to get access to Finnish territory as an area to deploy its own weapons systems or trust that Finland will not allow anyone else to use Finnish airspace or land territory.

As ardent students of military history the Russians have probably not forgotten that Finland allowed Germany to use northern Finland as a staging area for an attack towards Murmansk during the Second World War.

The Finnish dilemma here becomes: which option is the best when it comes to preserve Finland’s independence in the long run and if possible try to keep Finland out of a war in case of a crisis in the High North? Is it joining NATO thereby increasing the possibilities to defend Finland and raising the threshold for an attack, or is it to try to convince Russia that no hostile actions against Russia will be undertaken from Finnish territory?

In the case of Sweden a conflict involving the Baltic States more or less automatically would lead to Sweden being drawn into the war. This is not as pronounced when it comes to Finland. Finnish land territory and air space is not equally important for NATO in the case the alliance has to defend its

members in the region. Of course it would be an advantage for the alliance if Finland joined a war aiming at protecting the Baltic States, but it would probably not be crucial.

Making Russian and Finnish equations still more complicated is that Russia of today is not the Soviet Union when it comes to military resources. If there would be a conflict in the Baltic Sea region the question arises, does Russia have assets enough to both take on NATO and at the same time try to “borrow” parts of Finland? Perhaps history should be added also, what happened the last two times when Russia fought wars with Finland. Is that a factor that Finland should take in to consideration when assessing Russian deliberations?

What more, if Finland were a member of NATO Russia would most certainly feel the need to take precautionary measures against Finland in conjunction with operations in the Baltic Sea region? Would Finland be able to withstand that waiting for NATO support. NATO is not a fire brigade that arrives in force some minutes after you have called them.

Would the deterrence value of being member of the alliance be greater than the then high probability that Finland would immediately be drawn into a conflict compared with the chance that Russia would avoid the problem with facing another opponent which might in the best case (from a Russian point of view) act as a flank guard.

Two more factors complicating the Finnish equation is that Finland is totally dependent on the sea lanes in the Baltic Sea for its foreign trade. Finland is also a member of the EU and thereby bound by its solidarity clause. How much these two factors should be weighed in when it comes to choose between increased deterrence and guaranteed support (perhaps), something a NATO membership probably would mean, and the possibility that with a bit of luck be able to keep out of a possible war in the region?

The Finnish strategic choices are trickier than those for Sweden.

In the Swedish case it is quite clear, to my mind, that a NATO membership, combined with a reasonable degree of rearmament, is the obvious solution. It would increase stability in the Baltic Sea region by making NATO deterrence more credible and it would also increase the possibilities to defend Sweden if there was a war involving the Baltic States. A war that Sweden couldn't avoid to be drawn into.

Although Finland might be able to keep out of a conflict in the Baltic Sea area the Russian base complex on the Kola Peninsula changes the equation. How important is it for Russia to be able to defend it and how is it best done? As long as Finland is not a member of NATO there will probably be no automatic

response by the alliance if Russia tries to “borrow” parts of northern Finland as a precaution in case of an international crisis, in the High North, or somewhere else on the globe. This eventuality is a strong motive for joining NATO. It also goes for Sweden as deploying longer range air defence systems in northern Sweden would increase the air defence zone with another four hundred kilometres, and also threaten NATO airbases in northern Norway.

To sum it up. Swedish and Finnish strategies are to a large extent based on interpretations of historical experiences – very different experiences. In both cases adding factors to their strategic assessments that to a dangerous extent overshadow today’s realities – especially in the Swedish case.

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