Sweden's Role in International Security Affairs: Officially Non-Aligned but Ready to Serve

https://www.e-ir.info/2024/07/14/swedens-role-in-international-security-affairs-officially-non-aligned-but-ready-to-serve/

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This is an excerpt from *Neutrality After 1989: New Paths in the Post-Cold War World*, edited by Naman Karl-Thomas Habtom. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

Although Sweden is a small state in terms of both population, economic impact, and military powers, its foreign and security policy has always been characterised by high international ambitions and a strong desire to impact world affairs. Since the 1920s, Sweden has advocated the joining of international organisations, such as the League of Nations and subsequently the United Nations, to actively participate in, as well as influence, international relations. It has consistently maintained a strategic narrative that combines national priorities with international aspirations, particularly during times of different forms of global conflict, such as World War Two or the Cold War. During the Cold War, national priorities were guided by two key aspects. Firstly, the overarching ideology of 'non-alignment in peace aiming at neutrality in war' was a central pillar of Sweden's foreign policy. This ideology sought to preserve neutrality and independence during times of conflict. Secondly, Sweden has recognized the importance of maintaining a relatively strong defence capability to defend against potential invasions. Sweden's policy of 'small state realism' played a significant role in domestic politics, helping to neutralise criticism from both the political left and right (Dalsjö 2010b, 63). This policy aimed to strike a balance between maintaining neutrality and engaging in internationalism. Sweden actively participated in the United Nations, particularly on issues related to disarmament, and was vocal in criticising major powers when they committed acts of aggression against smaller states (Bjereld 1995, 23–35).

However, words and actions did not always align. When the Swedish military archives were opened following the end of the Cold War, a substantial amount of information revealed that Sweden's policy of neutrality had not been as strong or consistent as the Swedish people had been led to believe. Since the 1940s, Sweden had been actively preparing for extensive cooperation with NATO, especially in coordination with the Nordic NATO countries. A Danish investigation accurately described Sweden's strategy during this period as 'a declared non-alignment combined with close collaboration with Western countries' (Holmström 2023, 33).

The post-Cold War era brought about significant changes and new possibilities for Sweden in the international arena. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Sweden no longer saw the need to maintain a strict policy of neutrality, and the absence of power blocs allowed for a reassessment of the Swedish position and the exploration of new security policy avenues. As a result, Swedish government officials began to describe their country as a European state, and Sweden eventually joined the European Union (EU) in 1995. Another notable change was the alteration of Sweden's foreign policy declarations. The policy of neutrality was removed and replaced with the concept of 'military non-alignment' (Ministry for Foreign Affairs 1992, 30). This shift signalled a departure from strict neutrality and a willingness to engage in military cooperation and partnerships. Consequently, Sweden joined the NATO-initiated Partnership for Peace program (PfP). PfP was designed to promote cooperation and dialogue between NATO and non-NATO countries, allowing for military collaboration and interoperability without formal membership in the alliance (Dalsjö 2010b, 68).

The post-Cold War security policy shift culminated in the first decade of the new millennium. Firstly, in the early 2000s, the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) underwent a transformation regarding defence strategy. This emphasised

a transition from a traditional defence posture – focusing on repelling a potential invasion – to a more flexible defence approach centred on international missions and cooperative security efforts (Dalsjö 2010b, 66–70). Secondly, SAF transitioned from a conscription-based organisation to a smaller volunteer force. This shift led to a significant reduction in the number of soldiers that could be mobilised in times of war. Despite becoming a member of the European Union in 1995, full membership in NATO appeared politically challenging during the early 2000s, with public support for NATO membership ranging from 22 to 29 per cent in opinion polls between 2002 and 2013 (Bjereld and Oscarsson 2023, 8). The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 had a noticeable impact on public opinion regarding this matter. Furthermore, with a government decision in December 2014, the obligation to conduct conscript training was revived, and in January 2018, regiments began to receive conscripts after conscription training was reactivated (Löfven 2017).

Against the backdrop of Russia's increasingly aggressive policies towards Ukraine, culminating in a full Russian invasion in 2022, Sweden shifted its security policy completely towards a focus on investing in defence against invasion and a national perspective at the expense of international engagements. After the relatively unsuccessful missions in Afghanistan and Mali, Sweden was not involved in a single major international multilateral troop operation in 2023. The new perspective was expressed in the government declaration of 2023: 'Sweden is now changing course in its overall foreign, security, and defence policy. The government will primarily pursue a Swedish and European foreign policy' (Billström 2023, authors' translation). The highest priority, as emphasised by the government and a nearly unanimous Riksdag (the Parliament of Sweden), was the imminent entry into NATO, with membership being formally obtained in March 2024.

Sweden's International Military Missions

Sweden has participated in more than 20 international missions led by either the UN, EU, or a combination of the UN/NATO since the end of the Cold War (Försvarsmakten 2023). The largest of these was the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan from 2002 to 2014, during which Sweden contributed nearly 8,000 men and women in uniform. However, Sweden has a longstanding tradition as an active participant in international military missions, and its peacekeeping efforts can be traced back to 1956.

Watching a border in a blue beret: The beginnings of Swedish peacekeeping

The first peacekeeping operation of the United Nations was initiated during the Suez Crisis in 1956. It primarily focused on observer roles, patrolling, and creating buffer zones, and operated under the principles outlined in Chapter 6 of the UN Charter. In the subsequent operations to come, small states like Sweden and Ireland that were not directly involved in the conflicts and not part of any military alliance often played a prominent role, as for example in the mission to Cyprus. However, the so-called Congo Crisis of 1960–1964 was the beginning of more complex missions that altered UN involvement in terms of including actual combat. The newly independent Republic of the Congo (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) experienced a period of political upheaval and violence, which resulted in a UN deployment of peacekeeping forces to maintain stability and government support. However, the situation escalated into a full-scale civil war, involving various factions, regional conflicts, and international interests. Sweden participated by sending a contingent to Congo, comprising both army and air force personnel. Over the course of the four-year mission, more than 6,000 Swedish personnel served in Congo as part of the UN peacekeeping efforts. There were 19 deaths, an unprecedented number of casualties in Swedish peacekeeping missions (Tullberg 2012). After the Swedish mission in Congo, the Swedish UN operations returned to more traditional peacekeeping tasks in Cyprus and the Middle East until the end of the Cold War (Erikson Wolke 2019, 525–532).

After the Cold War: Three missions under NATO leadership

After 1991, Sweden expanded its participation in peacekeeping and crisis management efforts around the world. Starting in the latter half of 1990s, the officially nonaligned Sweden frequently contributed to NATO-led missions. The most extensive of these were the interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.

In August 1993, the Swedish government officially sanctioned the decision to contribute 800 soldiers to the United Nations, with an initial deployment to Tuzla in north-eastern Bosnia. The context for this mission was the ongoing conflict in the region, characterised by brutal ethnic cleansing carried out by Yugoslav and Bosnian Serb military forces. The primary objective of the UN deployment was to participate in operations with the goal of protecting refugees and aid convoys, establish safe zones, and to protect vulnerable communities (Ericson Wolke 2019, 532–533). Some contributing countries, such as Sweden, utilised the mandate under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter. This allowed for a more enforcement-oriented strategy, enabling the UN troops to use force more extensively to protect the civilian population (Henriksson 2023). Initially, the operation was carried out as a rather uncoordinated UN mission (UNPROFOR) with up to 39,000 personnel from approximately 40 countries. The failure of UNPROFOR to prevent the massacre in Srebrenica, where an estimated 8,000 Muslim men and boys were systematically killed, and the escalating violence, led to a more powerful international intervention. NATO launched an extensive air bombing campaign against Bosnian Serb military positions in August and September 1995. The objective was to halt the aggression and create conditions for negotiations, which led to the Dayton Agreement in December 1995. As a result of this agreement, UNPROFOR was replaced by the Implementation Force (IFOR), which was a NATO-led multinational peacekeeping force. This was the first time Swedish forces acted under the NATO flag (Ericson Wolke 2017, 533–534; Rapport från Riksdagen 2022, 30–33).

In the late 1990s, the conflict between predominantly Serb Yugoslav security forces and Kosovo-Albanian UCK guerrillas in Kosovo led to a significant humanitarian crisis. The conflict escalated into large-scale ethnic cleansing, with reports of widespread violence and expulsion of Kosovo's Albanian population by Serbian forces. NATO launched a military campaign against Serbian positions in March 1999, and the air and missile attacks targeted both military and strategic infrastructure in the province of Kosovo and the rest of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, including the capital city of Belgrade. Prior to the bombing campaign, in February 1999, the Swedish government approached NATO expressing Sweden's interest in participating in an international peacekeeping force, as a continuation of the intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In May, the government presented a proposition to the Swedish Parliament regarding a Swedish troop contribution in Kosovo. The tasks of the Swedish KFOR battalion, consisting of over 800 personnel (the entire KFOR force led by NATO comprised 50,000 personnel), ranged from traditional peacekeeping duties to purely military combat tasks. The specific Swedish mission was to prevent a Yugoslav attempt to retake the province by force, allowing NATO forces on the ground and in the air to keep Yugoslav forces outside Kosovo's borders. In June 2004, the Swedish troop contribution in Kosovo was reduced and continued to decrease until its conclusion in 2014 (Ericson Wolke 535–538).

Within a month after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, American bombers began to attack Afghan territory in pursuit of al-Qaeda operatives and to overthrow the Taliban government (Sjöstedt and Noreen 2021, 324). Many Western countries, apart from non-aligned ones like Sweden, began preparations for intervention in Afghanistan as part of the US- led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). However, Sweden was later invited to participate in a British-led multinational force in Afghanistan. The mission was guided by the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1386, adopted in December 2001, establishing the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) with the purpose of maintaining security and stability in Afghanistan. By 2003, ISAF was under NATO command. The Swedish government quickly responded by tasking its armed forces to prepare for the mission. Initially, the Swedish government proposed sending small contingents of 45 soldiers to serve within the British-led multinational force. Their main role focused on intelligence work and reconnaissance (Noreen *et al* 2017, 152–153).

By the end of 2004, the mission in Afghanistan underwent a radical change. The Swedish government tasked its armed forces to plan and prepare to assume command of a regional unit in Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan's second-largest city. As one of a few non-NATO members, Sweden assumed the responsibility to lead one Provincial Reconstruction Team area (PRT) – out of a total of 26 PRTs located across Afghanistan – a decision that was welcomed by NATO and other troop-contributing states. The situation in the north, where Mazar- e-Sharif is located, was relatively calm compared to the south. However, a deteriorating security situation also affected the Swedish contingent and led to the first significant personnel losses in Swedish missions since the one in Congo in the 1960s. In response to the worsening conditions and the need for a stronger presence, the newly elected government decided in 2006 to expand the Swedish contingent to a maximum of 600 soldiers per rotation, each lasting six months (Sjöstedt and Noreen 2021, 326). Starting in 2012, the Swedish military mission, along with other

participating nations, was tasked with providing support and training to the Afghan security forces during a transition process. Despite these efforts, the Taliban insurgency persisted and gained strength over the years – and its forces ultimately seized control of Afghanistan in 2021 following the withdrawal of foreign troops.

From Pragmatic Neutrality to Alliance Membership

Sweden has a long-standing tradition of neutrality in international affairs, but it is important to note that Swedish neutrality has never been absolute and has held various exceptions over time. Swedish neutrality gradually emerged during the nineteenth century as a widely adopted policy for small states to avoid getting involved in the conflicts of major powers. By remaining neutral, Sweden could stay out of conflict, and instead wait for an outcome without any risk of being caught in the middle (Wahlbäck 1984).

Swedish neutrality policy takes shape

One could argue that Swedish neutrality, as it was originally established in the nineteenth century and tested during the two World Wars, by no means corresponds with principles of international law. To the contrary, it was driven by national self-interest, aiming to avoid conflict at any cost through the strategy of evading military threats. During World War One, Sweden pledged to a policy that came to favour Germany (af Malmborg 2001, 201–202). This strategy became even more evident during World War Two when Sweden reached an agreement with Germany regarding transit traffic through Sweden. In practice, this meant that the policy of neutrality was abandoned on 8 July 1940, something which was recognized by Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson. After the cabinet meeting taking the decision of allowing German transit across Swedish territory, he pondered the idea that he had contributed to the abandonment of the neutrality policy. However, the message to the public was very different. Although the transit agreement meant that Sweden provided significant assistance to one of the warring parties, it was officially announced as merely a technical traffic matter. The implications for neutrality were not disclosed publicly as it was believed to have grave implications on Swedish public opinion (Dalsjö 2010a, 206–210; Johansson 1985).

The Cold War dual approach

Following the failed negotiations to form a Scandinavian defence alliance in 1949 – which resulted in Norway, Denmark, and later Iceland joining NATO – Sweden focused on developing its official policy of neutrality. Instead of isolating itself like other neutral states such as Switzerland, the ambition was rather to act as a bridge-builder between the East and the West, maintaining active diplomacy and fostering cooperation with both sides of the Cold War divide. However, while officially neutral, Sweden nevertheless pursued a confidential defence cooperation with NATO, as well as bilateral collaborations with the United States and the United Kingdom. These collaborations involved intelligence-sharing, joint military exercises, and the exchange of defence technologies. The activities were conducted discreetly, highlighting a 'dual approach' of maintaining active neutrality while engaging in confidential defence cooperation. This allowed the country to balance its security needs with a desire to remain independent, and avoid direct entanglements in the Cold War (Holmström 2023, 22–36).

Despite the fact the proposed Scandinavian Defence Union never materialised, the idea lived on in the form of informal agreements between the defence staff of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, aiming to ensure coordinated Scandinavian actions in the event of war. They prepared joint operations, established personal contacts that could be utilised during wartime, coordinated planning, and attended each other's war colleges. This was intensely scrutinised when archives were opened at the end of the Cold War. Researchers and journalists showed no mercy in their critique of the contradictory standards of Swedish security policy. Wilhelm Agrell, the doyen of Swedish contemporary military history, was among the first to raise concerns. In his 1991 book*Den Stora Lögnen* (*The Great Lie*, authors' translation), Agrell highlighted what he believed to be a significant deception, or falsehood, in the official discourse of Swedish security policy.

Following Agrell's initial findings, a public commission was established to further investigate and shed light on facts from the first decades after World War Two. The commission aimed to uncover any hidden or undisclosed information that might have impacted Swedish security policy between 1949–1969. It eventually concluded that in the

1950s, US security officials had already declared that despite Sweden not being a formal member of NATO, Europe's defence would benefit from SAF being closely associated with, and cooperating with, its NATO neighbours and the United States. This stance was emphasised by US President Dwight Eisenhower in 1960 when he adopted the policy of assurance of US military assistance to Sweden, should it ever be attacked by the Soviet Union. The United States was also to 'encourage other NATO countries (such as Denmark and Norway) to maintain discreet contacts with SAF as a basis for possible future active military cooperation' (SOU 1994, 11; 13, authors' translation). Despite the Swedish government being aware of these plans, Prime Minister Tage Erlander denied any such military collaboration when the issue was debated in the Riksdag. Such secrecy and double standards *vis-à- vis* the public was a recurring pattern throughout the Cold War. The unofficial cooperation continued for decades, and in the 1980s Sweden was seen by one of the American ambassadors to NATO as the 'seventeenth member of NATO' (Holmström 2023, 32).

After the Cold War: *As close to NATO as possible*

Through various covert interactions, different Swedish governments, both conservative and social democratic, laid the groundwork for a more open collaboration with NATO when the Cold War ended. A more general background for such collaborations is found in the critical changes of the geopolitical environment in Europe in the early 1990s. After the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Eastern Bloc and the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist as a unified counterforce to NATO – thus eliminating the traditional adversarial relationship between the two blocs. Within this context, the Social Democratic government submitted a 'non–binding statement of intent' to NATO, expressing Sweden's interest in participating in an international peacekeeping force in Kosovo (Ericson Wolke 2019, 536). According to such a request, Swedish troops would operate within a NATO-led force for the second time. Previously, a Swedish force had served under NATO command in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IFOR). Such an engagement would later be repeated within the framework of the NATO-led mission to Afghanistan.

The annual reports from SAF in the 2000s reveal that adaptation to NATO standards was regarded to be of the highest importance. For example, in a 2003 report it is highlighted that 'cooperation with NATO must be as close as Sweden's security policy line allows' (Försvarsmakten 2004). Still, from NATO's point of view, there was an explicit recognition of the Swedish military's non-alignment. A NATO evaluation, assessing Sweden as a partner country, clearly states that Sweden continues its close cooperation with NATO without compromising its position on freedom from military alliances (NATO 2013).

The first decade of the new millennium revealed an interesting paradox. Parallel to the de-prioritisation of Sweden's national defence – defence expenditures as a percentage of GDP decreased from 2.8 per cent in 1993 to 1.3 per cent in 2009 – Sweden increased its engagement in advanced international exercises, primarily with NATO forces. This engagement also occurred in real-life situations, such as in Libya in 2011, where Sweden conducted aerial reconnaissance with a small number of Gripen fighter jets. This occurred after the Swedish fighter jet divisions were reduced from 20 to four divisions (Holmström 2023, 589). As accurately depicted by Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, Sweden represented a 'military vacuum' in 2013 (Holmström 2023, 596). This vacuum, however, was only apparent in a Nordic security context. In the international arena, SAF – in collaboration with NATO primarily – developed in a manner that would have been unthinkable during the Cold War. A parliamentary evaluation of Sweden's participation in international military operations since the 1990s concluded that the experiences, especially from the NATO-led missions, 'are assessed to have significantly contributed to the professional development of officers and soldiers. Particularly those who have participated in actual combat situations' (Rapport från Riksdagen. 2022, 9, authors' translation). It is particularly emphasised that interoperability with other countries had developed. Additionally, Sweden's participation in international operations enabled the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Sweden and NATO. This agreement meant that Sweden would more swiftly both provide and receive support from NATO in the event of a crisis or war (Rapport från Riksdagen 2022, 80).

Around 2010, Sweden's close cooperation with NATO and the United States began to face criticism, primarily from members of parliament belonging to the Left and the Green parties. These critics expressed concerns about Sweden's involvement in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan. The debates surrounding Sweden's role in ISAF were heated, and differing opinions emerged across the Swedish political landscape. The Left Party in particular, known

for their non- alignment positions, were vocal in their opposition to Sweden's participation in the NATO-led mission. Even the Sweden Democrats, who had become a political force to be reckoned with, were outspoken opponents of participation in ISAF. Critics argued that Sweden's cooperation with NATO compromised its long-standing policy of neutrality and could potentially draw Sweden into conflicts that were not directly related to its national interests (Sjöstedt and Noreen 2021).

A key area of discontent concerned whether the Swedish military engagement in Afghanistan was a war-fighting operation or a peace and development mission. This topic continued to resurface throughout the duration of the ISAF operation and was often brought up in parliamentary debates. The Left Party described the Swedish contribution in terms of war, while those who supported the Swedish mission downplayed this image. The Swedish government tried to tone down the combat activities to gain broad parliamentary support for the continued participation in ISAF. Instead, the humanitarian efforts undertaken by Swedish forces were emphasised. The overall idea that Sweden was an international humanitarian actor to be reckoned with, highly appreciated by other states and actors, eventually pleased even the most critical voices against military engagement. This view created a form of 'catch-all-identity', or in other words, Sweden was both a significant security actor, contributing to international security, and a recognized humanitarian entrepreneur, working for justice, equality, democracy, and human rights (Noreen, Sjöstedt and Ångström 2017, 156).

After the finalisation of ISAF, details about the Swedish mission and its level of combat involvement were divulged. A public inquiry confirmed that the Swedish contingents had increasingly become involved in combat incidents, aligning with the Counterinsurgency (COIN) concept (SOU 2017, 75, 85–86). This highlights the complexity of the Swedish government's portrayal of the Swedish participation in ISAF and the difficulties in attempting to reconcile different perspectives. Firstly, the government and other political supporters of the ISAF mission strived to emphasise Sweden's commitment to peacekeeping, making its involvement consistent with its 'peace nation' tradition. This framing was primarily directed towards opposition parties and the public in order to gain their support and maintain a positive perception of the Swedish participation. In contrast, the reality was that Swedish troops were involved in combat in Afghanistan, although this was not divulged to the public until the mission had ended (Sjöstedt and Noreen 2021, 334–336).

From being NATO's '17th member' to a member-candidate

Following the conclusion of the ISAF mission and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Sweden experienced a notable shift in its defence priorities. In 2015, Sweden allocated only 1.1 per cent of its GDP to defence expenditures. However, in 2016, a parliamentary decision was made to expand defence costs for the first time since the Cold War. This decision included the protection of Gotland, a strategically significant island in the Baltic Sea. As a result, military spending was set to double between 2016 and 2025, indicating a significant increase in resources allocated (Holmström 2023, 602–603). Despite the increased resources to strengthen SAF and national defence, a clear line continued to be drawn regarding NATO membership which was considered inappropriate for several reasons: Swedish membership in NATO was deemed to increase tensions in Northern Europe, and the Swedish political discourse continuously emphasised that non-alignment 'serves Sweden well and contributes to stability and security in Northern Europe' (Wieslander 2021, 36). Additionally, public opinion was not considered ready for Swedish membership in NATO. Between 2014 and 2021 the proportion of Swedish people in favour of membership hovered at around 30 per cent, and among supporters of the ruling Social Democratic Party, the proportion was only around 20 per cent (Bjereld and Oscarsson 2023, 8).

This dual act of, on the one hand, close cooperation with NATO countries to the extent possible – and, on the other hand, a steadfast rejection of NATO membership, was the official Swedish line from 2014 to spring 2022. This strategy is commonly referred to as the Hultqvist Doctrine, after then- Minister of Defence, Peter Hultqvist (Wieslander 2021). On 13 May 2022, the Hultqvist Doctrine ended abruptly when a parliamentary task force, which included Hultqvist, presented the report 'A deteriorating security policy situation – consequences for Sweden'. The report concluded that given the security situation, NATO membership was the way ahead. Two days later, the governing Social Democratic Party, backed by broad parliamentary consensus, made the decision that Sweden would apply for membership in NATO (Bjereld 2023, 18). What caused this sharp U-turn by the Social Democrats?

The simple answer would be Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, a day which changed the European security order. However, the Swedish government continued to adhere to the Hultqvist Doctrine after the invasion. On 8 March, Prime Minister Magdalena Anderson had condemned the invasion in strong terms and firmly maintained that Swedish membership in NATO was out of the question: 'In this situation, a Swedish NATO application would further destabilise the situation in Europe' (Andersson in Bjereld 2023, 17).

Russian aggression was obviously an important background factor for Sweden's NATO shift. Nevertheless, it took one and a half months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine for the Swedish government to take a clear public stance in favour of membership. The actions of neighbouring Finland can help explain why Sweden changed its course (Bjereld 2023). Finland's situation, with its long border with Russia, has always been a crucial factor in Swedish security assessments. Finland's sensitive relationship with the Soviet Union after World War Two is viewed as a key reason as to why Sweden in the late 1940s could neither consider joining NATO, nor participate in a westward-oriented Scandinavian defence alliance (Dalsjö 2010a, 216). The end of the Cold War put an end to this delicate situation, making Finland and Sweden equally eager to solidify a good relationship with NATO. Russia's invasion of Ukraine became both a wake-up call and a window of opportunity for the Finnish government to take the next step. Assessing the increased threat level due to its proximity to an aggressive and neighbouring great power, the Finnish government was quicker and more explicit than Sweden in stating an interest to reconsider its non-alignment policy. Although the details of the relationship and communication between Finland and Sweden during the spring of 2022 have yet to be revealed, it can be contended that Sweden desired to keep pace with Finland, which led to both countries jointly applying for NATO membership on 17 and 18 May 2022 respectively (Bjereld 2023, 17–24).

Concluding remarks

Sweden advocated a non-aligned foreign policy aimed at neutrality in war. This principle had materialised in the form of a dogma or doctrine that has been proclaimed in foreign policy statements since 1945, regardless of which political party held power. However, political and military leadership alike actively pursued military cooperation with NATO, especially the Nordic NATO countries, the United Kingdom, and the United States – while the Swedish public was kept in the dark on this matter. Swedish official doctrine can nonetheless be viewed as a clever strategy. The numerous statements regarding how non- alignment was a policy that served Sweden well clearly resonated with the public. The doctrine also served to fend off possible criticism from the political opposition for 70 years, except for a few debates in the 1950s, and the above- mentioned critiques against the involvement in ISAF. Furthermore, it also served to construct Sweden as an independent non-aligned country that could equally criticize American bombings of North Vietnam during the Vietnam War and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The doctrine helped Sweden to gain international recognition as a 'peace nation' and a 'do-gooder' in international affairs (Sjöstedt and Noreen 2021). The question remains, however, to what extent this dual approach can be viewed as morally just. For decades, the general public was kept in the dark regarding the extent to which the military cooperation and support, clearly contrasting the policy of neutrality, were institutionalized practices. Also in the post-Cold War context, the interaction between Sweden and NATO has been a much more close-knit enterprise than would be expected in a relationship between an alliance and a non-aligned state. Thus, although Sweden's membership application to NATO travelled along a somewhat bumpy road, the transition from being the unofficial '17th member' to now being official the 32nd will likely be a smooth one.

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