Sweden – A Little More Lonesome in the Baltic Sea Area

Bo Hugemark

One of the arguments used in the 1990s by advocates of Swedish NATO membership – by myself among others – was that it would facilitate the Baltic states to become members or even that it was a prerequisite for that. There were sound military strategic reasons for that notion: it would be difficult to defend (or deter aggression against) the narrow rim of weak states without using the whole Baltic Sea area including base facilities in Sweden. Also Sweden (together with Finland and Poland) would be in an advantageous situation for deploying observers, staff and troops early in a crisis, thereby hopefully preventing further escalation. Swedish air protection and sea control would be vital for bringing in reinforcements.

This strategic argument seemed to be justified by the doubts aired in many places within NATO about membership of the Baltic states. One of the main arguments was that they were indefensible. That argument was of course an unacceptable simplification: no state is indefensible against all threats and none can be defended against all threats. Defensibility is no absolute. However, the existence of this argument made it vital to create a consistent strategic-operational region with Sweden as an anchor, a “regional great power.”

Fortunately the idea of Sweden’s membership as a prerequisite for accession of the Baltic states into the Alliance proved wrong. Evidently the pro-enlargement lobby in the American administration and other parts of the transatlantic community were not inclined to let a nation with dogmatic deadlocks such as Sweden prevent or delay the process of stabilizing this area.

To be fair it should be said that Sweden contributed in many ways to the process that made the Baltic states mature for NATO membership: first, in the early 1990s, by engagement in the negotiation process for Russian troop withdrawal; also by various means of sovereignty support, after much hesitation even including large shipments of weapons, and other support for the creation of national defense forces – a prerequisite for membership.

The situation today or in the near future is the opposite of what I envisaged in the 1990s. To be sure, Baltic membership is not a prerequisite for Sweden's; we could have obtained it long ago if we had liked. Perhaps, however, it is a prerequisite for getting Sweden to realize that the world has changed. But it is probably not a sufficient condition to make us change our policy accordingly. This could be deduced from the fact that the Swedish government now gives noises of satisfaction, saying that it is advantageous for us that the Baltic states have reached their goal, accompanied by assertions that they earlier had a security deficit, whereas we had not. This basic argument, “there is no need for a change,” is reinforced with the slogan that non-alignment has served us well.

In addition to this there are some more substantial arguments. One is that non-alignment gives us the option to stay neutral in the case of a war in our neighborhood. That is a softening of the formula from the Cold War, according to which non-alignment aimed at neutrality in war. That had to be changed when we entered the European Union and an unconditional neutrality policy became impossible. Now it is reduced to preserving the freedom of action for some unspecified contingencies. But pro-NATO critics put the impertinent question: what are those contingencies? They quote statements by the Swedish Prime Minister and Foreign Minister that they can hardly imagine situations when we would stay neutral if an EU member – or a would-be member – was attacked.
In spite of such logical inconsistencies, however, the neutrality argument has a strong effect on people who are indoctrinated with the belief that neutrality policy has saved us from two world wars and with the picture painted during the Cold War of NATO as an aggressive military power as bad as the Warsaw Pact (and neutrality as a morally superior stance). NATO’s performance as a peacemaker in recent years has gone unnoticed in Sweden, whereas its bombing campaigns have not.

Another argument is that NATO membership would bring Sweden under NATO’s nuclear umbrella. This argument ignores the fact that during the Cold War Sweden’s security rested upon the readiness of the Western powers to come to Sweden’s help if it was attacked, and that Sweden took secret steps to facilitate such assistance. Accordingly, Sweden was at that time under the nuclear umbrella, and at a time when nuclear release was quite a bit more probable than in possible crises today.

These two obsolete arguments are certainly not the real motives for the Swedish Social Democrats clinging to non-alignment. It is probably more a question of the fear of public opinion repercussions. The Swedish government has vivid memories of what happened when, in 1990, the government made a U-turn over night and in a footnote to an economic crisis package announced that Sweden would apply for (then) EC membership. Their constituency, having been told that EC membership was not compatible with neutrality, was taken by surprise and the “yes” margin in the 1994 referendum was slight. A U-turn on the NATO question would certainly result in a substantial flight of voters over to the left and green parties.

Accordingly, it seems as if Sweden’s non-aligned policy will not change as long as the present calm and peaceful situation in the Baltic Sea area prevails. And in case tension rises and crisis appears, one could expect the argument that going for NATO membership would unnecessarily increase the tension.

However, there is one pro-NATO argument that might influence the positions of today’s Swedish government: the wish to influence security policy questions that affect us. That the government sees this as vital has been demonstrated clearly by the close relations that Sweden has tried to establish with NATO headquarters and SHAPE, by Sweden’s cooperation in Partnership for Peace, etc. The Swedish Foreign Minister caused some amused astonishment some years ago by declaring that Sweden had as much influence – if not more – from outside as if it had been a member.

This is of course not true. And if NATO will – as is probable – still be the main actor for building a security structure in the Nordic area or for crisis management, being outside will not be an agreeable situation for a Swedish Prime Minister, or for a Finnish. The Finnish columnist Olli Kivinen wrote a couple of years ago in the Helsingin Sanomat: “An amusing future scenario is to imagine Finnish and Swedish ministers a few years from now in the corridors of NATO headquarters asking Estonian and Latvian colleagues what decisions were made concerning the Baltic Sea area at a meeting they had attended as NATO members.”

Both the Swedish and Finnish Prime Ministers must have experienced recently as Presidents of the EU that it is NATO that carries weight. Finland and Sweden have to a great extent walked hand in hand in security policy matters during the 1990s. There are now signs that the Finnish position might change quicker than the Swedish. For instance, former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, in seminars in Finland as well as during a recent conference organized by the Swedish Atlantic Council, has declared that in his opinion Finland should join NATO. And a year ago Finland’s Defense Minister said in a seminar in Stockholm that he could imagine a situation where Finland but not Sweden would join NATO – but not the reverse.
I mentioned in the introduction my view on the strategic interrelation between Sweden and the Baltic states. I believe that even more with regard to Finland and Sweden. The historical experience from 1940 showed that Finland could not get military assistance from abroad if Sweden was neutral. My conclusion was that Finland and Sweden had to join NATO together. I am no longer sure. As he announced that Finland would have their EU referendum in 1994 before Sweden, President Ahtisaari declared that Finland had to exercise some leadership. Perhaps Finland will have to do that again and drag an irresolute Sweden into the security policy alliance of Euro-Atlantic democracies.

Colonel (ret.) Bo Hugemark is President of the Swedish Atlantic Council.