

Sweden: Social Democrats abandon 200 years of neutrality

By Steve James
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On February 11, the Social Democratic government of Goran Persson took the decision for Sweden to enter military alliances and defensive pacts with its neighbours and other members of the European Union.

Although the decision was approved two days later by a majority of parties in the Riksdag, the move has split the Swedish Social Democratic government

from its informal coalition partners, the Left Party and the Green Party, who oppose the move. The Social Democrats drafted the new doctrine jointly with ostensible opposition parties, the Moderates, Christian Democrats and Peoples Party.

In a statement issued by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and read in the *Riksdag* on February 13, the government outlined its new doctrine. Whilst it began by supporting the Bush administration's supposed "war on terror", the statement criticised the US for its use of the death penalty and its stance on nuclear weapons and abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

Other implicit criticisms focused on key US policy areas such as the Middle East, where the statement called for an alliance with "Muslim nations" and the creation of a "democratic Palestinian state". The Persson government also called for talks between the FARC guerrilla movement and the Colombian government at a point when US military intervention in Colombia is rapidly escalating, as well as for "peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula."

Behind its statement, and the criticisms of its transatlantic partner, the Swedish government is seeking to justify a renewal of European imperialism.

Sweden has since 1992 been a member of NATO's "Partnership for Peace" programme and its armed forces already patrol as part of United Nations, NATO, or OSCE operations in many corners of the globe. In 2001, nearly 1,000 mechanised infantry troops were deployed to Kosovo, as part of the KFOR army of occupation.

Nevertheless the formal abandonment of neutrality is still of historic significance. Sweden's ruling class is finally ending a policy that has kept the country's armed forces out of active participation in two centuries of European wars, including both World Wars and the military aspects of the US Cold War against the Soviet Union.

In doing so it is signaling that no capitalist government can stand aside from the violent global struggle for geo-political influence and resources in the 21st century. Sweden's move, couched in terms rather explicitly opposed to the US, is also a clear attempt to support efforts led by the larger European powers, particularly Germany, to advance a more aggressive and independent military policy. Sweden's Foreign Minister Anna Lindh had been among the most vociferous in denouncing US policy, recently describing the Bush administration's Middle East trajectory as "insane."

The region of which Sweden is the geographic centre covers the Baltic Sea, North East Russia, Northern Germany and Poland, Norway, Finland, and the Baltic States of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. It is one of the

great trading zones and political fault lines of Europe. Sweden's rulers suffered a major defeat by Tsarist Russia in the 1709 battle of Poltava, and the killing of Swedish monarch Karl XII outside Trondheim during an attack on Southern Norway in 1718. In 1809, following a final and overwhelming defeat by Russian forces, Sweden lost control of all of Finland. As part of the post Napoleonic carve-up of Europe, Norway was handed over to Sweden from Denmark, with British approval but without the support of most Norwegians.

From that time, the country's rulers retreated from direct military involvement in European military conflicts, seeking instead to play off its more powerful rivals—particularly Germany, Britain and Russia—against each other.

Swedish iron ore became, after the discovery of new steel making techniques in 1878, a crucial factor in relations between Sweden and Germany. Lacking any ore of its own, Swedish raw materials became central to German industrial development, which the Swedish bourgeoisie used to fend off German aspirations to incorporate much of Scandinavia into a customs union, *Zollverein*, with it. Swedish ore could always be sold to Britain, if pressure from Germany became too great although, at one point, the bulk of Swedish mines, and the rail system, nearly fell under German ownership. Trade with Britain retained huge significance, with Britain remaining the largest export market between 1874 and 1913, but Germany overtook Britain as the main source of Scandinavia imports.

During the First World War, all the Scandinavian states remain neutral, and unoccupied, accepting war profits from all sides. The great power military balance was sufficiently close to militate against a decisive naval confrontation in the Baltic or the North Sea between the British and German navies. Instead both sides preferred Scandinavian neutrality to keep open a conduit for war materials.

After the 1917 October revolution in Russia, and the German military collapse in 1918, the changed map and political balance of Europe opened doors for British and US trade influence in Scandinavia and the Baltic. The British Navy freely cruised the Baltic, while the Soviet government sought to develop relations with the Scandinavian states as trading partners, a buffer zone against imperialist attack, and a conduit for diplomats, emissaries and those drawn to the first workers' revolution. Although the social democratic parties succeeded in preserving capitalist rule in the region, the workers' state exerted an immense attraction for the working class and hampered efforts by the Scandinavian capitalists to draw their countries into imperialist intrigues against the Soviet Union.

Throughout the interwar period, German, French and British imperialism tried to bind the Scandinavian states into their own economic and political zone of influence. After Hitler's accession to power in 1933, German trade and political influence grew to the extent that Britain issued statements insisting Scandinavia must not be incorporated into a *grossraumwirtschaft*—German led economic zone. German protests, on the other hand, were sufficiently weighty to force editorial and ministerial sackings in Denmark and Sweden for criticising Hitler. In the end, greater

trade and economic integration ensured that Scandinavian involvement in the World War that finally erupted in 1939 was far greater than in 1914.

Over the same period, Scandinavian capital and the Social Democrats came to an historic accord, embodied in the Saltsjobaden agreement of 1937. This allowed for the rapid modernisation of industry and some improvements in living conditions, in return for the imposition of class peace by the Social Democrats and the trade union leaders.

During the war the Social Democrats' sought to defend Scandinavian capital by preventing a German invasion while continuing to supply iron ore to both sides if at all possible. In April 1939, the Social Democrats assured Nazi Marshall Ribbentrop that there would be no disruption of iron supplies.

Following the invasion by Hitler's armies in 1940, both Norway and Denmark were incorporated into the German ruled economic sphere, although increased resistance, a popular uprising in Denmark in 1943, combined with war reversals for the Nazis on all fronts loosened these ties. Sweden continued to supply ore throughout, allowed German troops to pass across its territory, and only in 1943 under Soviet pressure allowing allied bombers to operate from Swedish airports, and to curtail the ore trade.

After the Nazi defeat, with Soviet troops in northern Norway, and in the Danish Bornholm islands, Sweden floated but failed to win support for a Scandinavian neutrality union. During the early years of the US-led efforts to encircle the Soviet Union in the Cold War, NATO built bases in Greenland, Iceland and listening posts in northern Norway. The Soviet Union built up a powerful Baltic Fleet, based in Kaliningrad. West Germany began to rearm in 1954.

The Soviet Union proposed the Baltic as a "sea of peace", enlisting support from Finland and Sweden in opposition to the NATO members, while advancing the "neutrality" of Sweden, Finland and Austria.

Throughout the Cold War era, the Swedish ruling class and the Social Democrats utilised the country's apparently intermediate position, between NATO and the Soviet Union, backed by its by now highly advanced arms and engineering industries, to develop its own international interests.

Rapidly expanding profits allowed the working class to extract significant social improvements from Swedish capital without big struggles. This was the period of "the Peoples' Home" (*folkhemmet*), during which Swedish welfare provision was lauded by reformists and the Stalinist Communist Party alike as proving the possibility of improving the lot of the working class without politically challenging the profit system.

At the same time, the Social Democratic government developed relations with various bourgeois national regimes in the former colonial countries. The Soviet Union took a lenient attitude to Swedish arms sales and influence, viewing this as preferable to NATO expansion. Successive Social Democratic governments presented themselves as "non-aligned", i.e., pursuing an apparently independent foreign policy alongside governments like the Yugoslav Tito regime and numerous radical nationalist regimes in Africa.

In 1959, for example, Sweden supported Algerian independence against France and later criticised both the US attack on Vietnam and the Kremlin's repression in Czechoslovakia. The US froze diplomatic relations, after Sweden protested the bombing of Hanoi. Swedish Social Democratic leader and Prime Minister Olof Palme, mysteriously assassinated in 1986, embodied this era. Palme also acted as one of the leading advocates of nuclear free zones in the Baltic and of nuclear free corridors running across Europe, with Soviet approval. A Palme Commission was established to work on this, while the Swedish arms industry—Saab and Bofors—continued to develop their sales around the world.

Despite its pretensions to having a non-aligned status, Sweden became

ever more closely integrated into the framework of European trade—firstly in the British-led European Free Trade Area and later into the European Community, forerunner to the European Union.

The reunification of Germany, the subsequent collapse of the USSR and capitalist restoration across Eastern Europe destroyed the balance of Swedish foreign policy. Sweden, Finland and Denmark rapidly sought full EU membership, and a necessarily closer relationship with Germany. As a consequence, the EU grew an entire northern arm by 1995, with Norway an EU member in all but name.

Sweden's Ericsson and Finland's Nokia won dominant positions in the telecommunications industries on the basis of large-scale rationalisations, job losses and the development of global production. Subsequently, most of Sweden's old "national champion" industries such as Volvo and Saab have been bought out or have sought global alliances. Currently, the Swedish and Finnish telecom operators are proposing a merger to form a company capable of competing with British Telecom and Deutsche Telekom.

Swedish capital, increasingly dominant in Estonia, and the Baltic region, is also seeking a foothold in China, particularly for Ericsson and a route into Russia via its northern expanses. In short, Sweden's leading corporations are embroiled in all leading areas of the world economy and its fate is more immediately bound up with global instabilities and tensions.

In the past, Swedish foreign policy sought regional stability in order to develop industry and trade, utilising the antagonisms between its stronger rivals. Now, in order to defend its global interests, Sweden must embark on the same violent road as US and European capital, lest it be excluded from the spoils of a new division of the world. While it is by no means clear that the Swedish bourgeoisie will always line up with Europe in conflicts with the US, it is impossible for them to avoid seeking alliances with stronger and better-armed powers.

It is not excluded that escalating world tensions may provoke new, but historically resonant, alarms close to home. The shores of the Baltic Sea are littered with unresolved disputes. Particularly over the political status of the Baltic States currently applying to join NATO, the Russian province of Karelia—long the target of Finnish national aspirations—and the impoverished Russian military enclave of Kaliningrad, formerly the East Prussian capital Königsburg. The Finnish/Russian border, fought over on numerous occasions, is currently one of the longest borders between the relative wealth of the EU and the economically impoverished, politically unstable but resources-rich territories of the former Soviet Union.

Sweden's Social Democrats, who in or out of power have remained politically dominant for decades, have, along with the Moderates, set about systematically undermining welfare provision. Even now social provision remains at a considerably higher level than in most of the rest of Europe. Escalating militarism, as in the rest of Europe, poses the ruling class with the necessity of carrying through a serious conflict with the working class.

For the working class in Sweden, the end of Swedish neutrality must initiate an urgent period of reckoning with the negative role played by Social Democracy and Stalinism in the region throughout the 20th century. There is no way back to the days of relative post-war national isolation. Rather, the Swedish and Scandinavian working class can only defend its interests through the development of a new strategic political alliance based on a socialist programme with workers across the Eurasian landmass, and in the United States.

Background reading on Swedish history:

Patrick Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers 1890-1940*, Cambridge University Press, 1997

Oerjan Berner, *Soviet Policies toward the Nordic Countries*, Harvard University, 1986

Franklin D. Scott. *Sweden: The Nation's History*, University of Minnesota Press, 1977

David Arter, *Scandinavian Politics Today*, Manchester University Press, 1999

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