


Chapter 6

International Conflict: Post–Cold War Swedish Neutrality Questioned

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ABSTRACT

The undeclared war by Russia on Ukraine has had wide-ranging implications for European security. The security architecture, thought to be unchangeable, has shifted dramatically. Threat perceptions across Europe, generally and specifically in Scandinavia, have transformed. Whereas neutral countries such as Finland and Sweden had steadfastly held the political view that they would refrain from peacetime military alliances, Russia's aggression in Europe forced them to reevaluate and recalculate their military security, forcing them to reinvestigate the best path forward to maintaining their territorial integrity. Since the Napoleonic Wars, Sweden had remained neutral, which allowed it to avoid the damage of the 20th-century wars. However, after the Cold War, it abandoned its official neutrality for the more flexible “non-alignment.” The common perspective on Russia led Sweden and NATO to move closer, especially after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

INTRODUCTION

This is not a time to keep the facts from the people, to keep them complacent. To sound the alarm is not to panic but to seek action from an aroused public. For, as the poet Dante once said: 'The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.' - John F. Kennedy

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During the Cold War, when NATO was founded in 1949, Denmark and Norway chose to become member states, and Sweden resumed its policy of neutrality that had spared it from suffering through both world wars. Finland also remained neutral during the Cold War due to Soviet pressure (Yigit, 2023). However, the Swedish Prime Minister of the 1950s, Erlander, attempted to extend the American security guarantee to Sweden, even though the country was officially neutral. To be under American protection, the Swedes purchased large quantities of military equipment from the United States and shared intelligence, permitting Washington to use Swedish air bases. In addition, there was an agreement that a NATO member state would host the royal family and government in the event of a Soviet attack. All of these were unofficial to preserve Swedish neutrality.

The year 1991 was a turning point for Swedish foreign policy. The military threat diminished with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR (Yigit, 2023a). Therefore, becoming more involved in the international arena was less dangerous. The concept of neutrality was softened and replaced by the policy of “non-alignment”, which consists of staying away from permanent alliances. This policy gives fewer constraints than absolute neutrality. In 1994, Sweden joined NATO's “Partnership for Peace” and later the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (Thorhallsson & Stude Vidal, 2024). Sweden also entered the European Union in 1995. Sweden issued a declaration of solidarity in 2009, which said it would help a European Union or Nordic country if attacked by a foreign power.

The most pressing question concerning Sweden has concerned what their neutrality was originally based on. What roles did they play in the Cold War? How did they behave in the context of Western European integration? Why did they consider EEC/EC membership incompatible with its neutrality, while EU affiliation was described as compatible with it, especially when one considers that the EEC was less integrated and dubious in terms of neutrality? To answer these questions, it is first necessary to look at the relationships between small and large states. They were characterised by two dominant tendencies: the will of the larger ones to bring the smaller ones under their control, or at least within their sphere of influence. This was opposed by the smaller states, who wished to evade these efforts and achieve as much independence as possible.

Small states had the choice between the following options: neutrality - imposed or internationally secured or “freely chosen” (voluntarism); Alliances with neighbouring states (a regional must); and a unique option, one binding European Integration (Rossi, 2023). This should immunise against isolation, occupation, annexation, and absorption. These survival strategies brought more or less success before 1945 to the “Little Entente” (Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia 1920/21-1939), the “Roman Protocols” (Austria, Hungary and Italy 1934), the “Oslo Group of States” (Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark

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