



Sweden's self-perceived global role: Promises and contradictions

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ABSTRACT

Sweden has a global brand as being a democratic, happy and progressive society that is in consensus. However, when looking more closely at the key brand and reputational components of the Swedish international brand and reputation it is possible to see the various irregularities and contradictions that are present.

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1. Introduction

The argument put forward here by us does not seek to be the definitive article on the topic of the different subjects that amount to Sweden's global role. The idea is to highlight some of Sweden's current choices and dilemmas faced by a minor power in the contemporary environment of international relations that have been influenced by the recent past. Sweden is attempting to 'punch above its weight'¹ on the international arena through the use of shaping the international brand and reputation of the country to increase its international likeability and therefore foreign policy options. However, the gap between rhetoric and practice, at both the domestic and international level, is becoming increasingly apparent.

Sweden is often ranking among the happiest nations in the world or the least corrupt and other positive indexes that hint at a happy and functional society in the 21st century. But is all actually as it seems, represented by the foreign policy brand and reputation of the country? Historical experience has shown that a subjectively constructed 'ethical' principled stand by minor powers in times of global turmoil and tension is a difficult balance. The contradiction here can be seen through utopian values and ideals being enforced with a top-down approach that are presented as being national interests, which in effect have the potential to create greater risk for Sweden and are therefore not in the best interests of the country.

Externally, Sweden can be the butt of jokes and criticism, for example, the negative perception of Sweden in the wake of mass migration (Neuding, 2018). Certainly, Sweden has come under critique from President Trump for its approach to certain aspects of its messianic-like

humanitarian superpower mission – namely mass migration and the resulting consequences. Criticism of Sweden's international brand image in terms of the gap between rhetoric and practice has been levelled in the past. For example, Maurice Keens-Soper is noted for having observed: "And then there are the Swedes, the darlings of the Third World, whose good works are matched only by their glutinous smugness" (Holmberg, 1989: 123).

As a result of its negative experiences from the numerous wars and military ventures of the 18th and 19th century Sweden was forced to rethink its foreign and military policy and pursued a strategy that varied between neutrality and non-alignment. However, it is a policy that has been tested over the centuries, such as the Second World War. This does not mean that Sweden is disengaged from international relations and affairs, especially in the post WWII era. This is found in Sweden's attempt to define its role on the global stage as a "humanitarian superpower" and its feminist foreign policy through communicating to a global audience a brand and reputation in order to provide soft power leverage. What happens when these brands and attempts at reputation management do not live up to the promises of the communication when deeds seem to betray the word?

2. International branding of Sweden's image and foreign policy

A brand is intended as a mechanism that can create an emotional association and shortcut that generates an instantaneous recall of emotions with an object or subject as a means of increasing the likelihood of successfully attaining set goals and ambitions. It is intended to enable a tangible outcome through intangible communication of worth and value to a target audience as a means to establishing a relational experience between the communicator and the audience (Newman, 2016). To create such an international brand and reputation as 'humanitarian superpower' requires elite consensus, and collaboration at the level of politics and mass media.

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¹ For an example of the topic of spiral of silence in Swedish public debates see <http://mediastudier.se/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Sverigebildens.pdf#page=60> (in Swedish).

A basis for the humanitarian superpower brand can be found in the Swedish understanding and practice of neutrality and non-alignment, which can be understood as humane values and a basis for the self-perceived legitimacy of Sweden to act in global affairs. These are two important concepts in highly politicised debates, such as the NATO membership debate (Simons, Manóilo, & Trunov, 2019). The Swedish understanding of neutrality politics is summed up very well in a speech by Olaf Palmer in 1968.

We decide the Swedish neutrality policy ourselves. Its meaning is freedom of alliance in peace aimed at neutrality in war. Therefore, we do not join military alliances, do not join in any major power block. Therefore, through tenacity and consistency, we must build confidence in our ability to hold on to the chosen course of action, confidence in our will not to fall away from pressure from foreign power. Neutrality policy does not involve the pursuit of isolation. Our opportunities to influence developments in the world are small. But it does not reduce the obligation of the small nation to work for peace and reconciliation between the peoples, for democracy and social justice. Neutrality policy does not condemn us to silence.²

The speech contains a moralistic and duty bound stance, but one that is intended to develop Sweden's ability to act in international affairs in spite of its size and capacity owing to the brand and reputation that is tied to humanitarian values. This vision is messianic in nature, by the stubborn and determined approach to bring Swedish experience and values to a troubled world. Neutrality came to be an important part of Sweden's international brand identity (Bjereld, 1994: 238). According to the Security Politics website the definition of non-aligned means (supported by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)):

Sweden is military alliance-free. This means, among other things, that we do not enter into agreements on mutual defence guarantees and that we ourselves are responsible for the defence of Sweden. On the other hand, our military alliance freedom does not constitute an obstacle to participation in international defence cooperation.³

Although this stance has evolved to militära alliansfrihet (non-aligned) according to observations, the Swedish political elite increasingly favour NATO membership, while the public strongly support a continuation of the non-alignment policy (Ydén, Berndtsson, & Petersson, 2019). It represents a post-Cold War rebranding of the idea of neutrality or non-alignment to meet the demands of the international relations environment of the 21st century. This is linked to the Swedish concept of värdegrund (common value foundation), which has practical and operational implications. This is a concept and a practice that lacks a uniform definition (Frånberg, 2004). Orlenius defines värdegrund as referring to certain basic principles, as people's equal value cannot be ignored, and partly these basic principles are one common frame of reference that all people should understand and live by (Orlenius, 2010). Its operationalisation is intended as a means to counter possible alternative sources of idea and The end of result is value influence in society by framing what is deemed to be socially 'acceptable' in Sweden, for example the debate on the migration issue. However, equally important, it serves as a class marker and tool for consensus making aimed at both elites in public sector, businesses, politics and media as well as the urban middle class. Therefore, in practice the concept of värdegrund is serving as a guideline for socially acceptable narratives, but also a means to signal belonging to a group.

The spiral of silence concept, which was developed by Noelle-Neuman states that often people do not like to be seen as being in a minority opinion, and are less likely to express their opinion under such circumstances for fear of social isolation (Noelle-Neuman, 1984). At the national level värdegrund

are used as a mechanism of social control and to enforce the spiral of silence that has a Swedish equivalent known as åsiktskorridor or Opinion Corridor (Johanssen, 2018: 60) in order to force a national 'consensus' on key issues affecting society and its direction. "Opinion corridor has captured the phenomenon that certain opinions are expressed be alone and those who think differently have either not allowed to speak publicly or not dared to express their opinion" (Oscarsson, 2013). This is discussed in a mainstream media article detailing the costs exacted by the åsiktskorridor, such as self-censorship, preventing a constructive debate, fear of exploring reality unreservedly, and diminishing the confidence in the power of arguments (Marteus, 2015).

At the international level, the brand of Sweden as a humanitarian superpower concerns an attempt to project soft power through the use of values and not interests. This is not only an issue about signalling what Sweden supposedly stands for within the context of global affairs, but is an attempt for Sweden to try and punch above its weight⁴ in a system of international relations where it would otherwise likely be a minor player. This is also a means of signalling Sweden's belonging to the system of global liberal democracy (and increasing a Euro-Atlantic political and security identity at the establishment elite level).⁵ As such, the creation and assimilation of the humanitarian superpower brand has been discussed at length at the political level and in the Swedish mass media. The end result is that the Swedish human world is categorised in to an emotional binary projection of 'clean' and 'unclean' politics from a universal cultural perspective (Barrling, 2016).

It was the former Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, from the centre-right Moderate Party, who was taking the party towards a more progressive direction is credited with the term humanitär stormakt (humanitarian superpower) publicly. Although, it was former Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt in Reinfeldt's government (Moderate Party) that used the term first as part of official Swedish foreign policy.⁶ This was an emotional call for the Swedish public to accept the coming mass migration, the call was welcomed by the elite, which even generated some comparisons to the "courage" of Britain's David Cameron (Mellin, 2014).⁷ The humanitarian superpower brand is a part of the värdegrund system and a card used when a problem may emerge in forming a national consensus. The media consensus followed the government line within a value approach to its global role too. "Bildt's word selection is not unjustified. Sweden is making significant efforts in many parts of the world. It does not only happen from our good heart but is of course also a way for a small country to create a role in the international arena, to become an actor that the real great powers observe. But a high profile duty" (Holmberg, 2013). This is in keeping with the desire and aspiration for Sweden to project that it can punch above its weight in the global arena.

An opinion piece listed 10 occasions when Swedes and Sweden set an example and to inspire the rest of the world, within the context of the notion of being a humanitarian superpower. These occasions were:

- In 2010 when Sweden's international aid was the highest in the world;
- Raoul Wallenberg's saving Jewish lives in Hungary in the Second World War;

⁴ In the context of this commentary, to punch above Sweden's weight refers to lack of tangible resources, such as economic capacity, military capacity, size of the population, in comparison to leading international actors such as US, China, Russia, France and so forth. So therefore, values and norms are intended to generate intangible forms of soft power through norms and values to compensate and gain greater international influence and recognition.

⁵ See <https://www.government.se/legal-documents/2004/03/20030484/> as an expression of commitment to this politico-military orientation.

⁶ Please see <https://www.regeringen.se/49b753/contentassets/3f435e49030a4954a799aa5d8e044c9a/regeringens-deklaration-vid-2013-ars-utrikespolitiska-debatt-i-riksdagen-onsdagen-den-13-februari-2013>.

⁷ The use of the projected threat to Sweden's humanitarian superpower status has been used on various occasions within the context of the migrant crisis from the year 2015 and the 2018 election: <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=1650&artikel=6815963>; <http://www.smp.se/debatt/ar-sverige-fortfarande-en-humanitar-stormakt/>; <https://www.dagenssamhalle.se/kronika/aeven-en-humanitaer-stormakt-maste-strama-21516>; <https://www.dagenssamhalle.se/debatt/ska-sverige-bli-en-humanitaer-stormakt-7099>; <http://www.gp.se/kultur/kultur/den-humanit%C3%A4ra-stormaktstiden-%C3%A4r-inte-%C3%B6ver-1.9743499>.

² *Neutralitetspolitik*, Olaf Palmer Centre, <http://www.olofpalme.org/amne/neutralitetspolitik/>, (accessed 14 October 2019).

³ *militära alliansfrihet*, Säkerhetspolitik, <http://www.sakerhetspolitik.se/Forsvar/internationalt-forsvar/Militar-alliansfrihet/>, 5 October 2015 (accessed 14 October 2019).

- when Sweden took in refugees during the Second World War;
- when Harald Edelstam (Swedish ambassador) saved lives during the Chilean coup of 1973;
- Dag Hammarskjöld forming an independent United Nations;
- Alva Myrdal's dedication to the causes of peace and women's rights;
- Olaf Palme's condemnation of US bombing of Hanoi in 1972;
- all the Swedes that had taken part in UN peace keeping missions since 1956;
- Folke Bernadotte and the White Buses (saving Jewish lives in WWII);
- and when Sweden supported the fight against apartheid like no other country (Gad, 2015).

This was published at a time to try and emphasize Swedish värdegrund had a historical context at the moment when the migration crisis became an increasingly hotly contested political issue in the country and public opinion began to diverge from the imposed elite consensus as already seen in the 2006 and 2010 elections. A certain set of humanitarian values are projected as being tantamount to the national interest.

A value-ideological extension to Sweden's global brand and complementary to the notion of humanitarian superpower is the operational concept of the "feminist foreign policy" agenda was announced in October 2014. Various statements on the significance of this step are found on the Government website, such as "Sweden has the world's first feminist government. Gender equality is at the centre, both in national and international work" and "Sweden is the first in the world to design and conduct a feminist foreign policy and the manual is the first of its kind." The motivation for this foreign policy direction is consistent with the scope and frame of the humanitarian superpower frame.

Gender equality between women and men constitutes a fundamental objective for Swedish foreign policy. Compliance with women's and girls' basic human rights constitutes both an obligation within the framework of international commitments and a prerequisite for reaching Sweden's broader foreign policy goals on peace, security and sustainable development.⁸

Swedish mainstream mass media and journalism welcomed the feminist foreign policy vector and declared it to be needed particularly at this point in time with such conflicts as Yemen, where women and children are particularly vulnerable. This is framed as being Sweden's global duty and to be seen on the right side of history (SVT, 2018). The impact of the feminist foreign policy has been both personalised and sensationalised, the Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström has publicly stated the creation of a high impact and meaningful foreign policy (DN, 2018). However, contradictions have appeared with practice, such as supplying weapons and weapons technology to the volatile Middle East or when Swedish ministers visiting countries in the Middle East North Africa region wear a hijab in defiance of the rhetorical feminist principles, which sparked debates on the justification or lack of it (SR, 2017a). The occasion when the Swedish Minister of Trade Ann Linde wore a headscarf in a meeting in Tehran was accused of hypocrisy given the feminist foreign policy (SR, 2017b). There have also been accusation of "organised hypocrisy" by Sweden that is accused of championing international human rights while ignoring the plight of indigenous minorities (Mörkenstam, 2019). When conducting interviews, a number of these aforementioned points recur, especially the choice between pursuing foreign policy based on values versus interests.

One of the interviewees was Sven Hirdman, who was State Secretary at the Swedish Ministry of Defence (1979–82) and Swedish Ambassador to Moscow (1994–2004), in an email interview (answers received on 30 January 2019) perceived Sweden as a humanitarian power with a

good track record and Sweden's foreign policy should be guided by norms and interests in accordance with the UN Charter. Other public figures in Sweden also subscribe to the necessity for Sweden to adhere to the global brand as a humanitarian superpower. Long-time peace theorist and campaigner, Valentin Sevén in many conversations and writings, believes in adherence to the path of peace, which is cultivated through dialogue and a highly principled stand. His proposition and campaign for a Minister of Peace and not just a Minister of Defence, to tangibly demonstrate commitment to a humanitarian vision and as an example for other countries to follow. In an email Sevén answered "Swedish governments and parliaments have since long had humanitarian ambitions, but that goes for many governments. A country that does not have a particular peace portfolio in its cabinet should not be considered a humanitarian 'super'-power. A policy that does not creatively tries out all easily achievable steps to make international demilitarization and a culture of peace a reality for coming generations is less than fully humanitarian in its approach."

When asked the question whether Sweden should follow interests or values, Sevén gave a complex reply via email (on 3 February 2019). "Interests could be narrow, nationalistic or egoistic in nature, or take the interests of all of humanity including coming generations into account. Some like Liberal party leader Jan Björklund stresses the need to see Swedish interests first when there is a conflict, be it with Arabian or Russian interests."

There is a tendency to try and shutdown debate that diverges from the 'approved' narrative, and there is even a concept in Swedish that describes the politico-cultural context – *åsiktskorridor* (opinion corridor). The concept is defined as being a "metaphor for the boundaries of what general views are accepted in the public debate."⁹ Some observers have gone as far as to note that the *åsiktskorridor* is part of the Swedish value system owing to Swedish consensus culture (Johansson, 2016). In essence it is a mechanism that is intended to achieve enforced public consensus through initiating a spiral of silence that can impose costs and punishment (to marginalise socially, economically or politically "transgressors") on those that break the elite 'consensus'. In practice this implies that opinions that differ from the societal consensus are in effect 'irrelevant' (Pihl, 2018). This has not stopped some measure of divergence from accepting the official narrative uncritically.

One of the points of contention is the apparent lack of consistency in applying the implied principles in the concepts of Sweden's humanitarian superpower brand and the feminist foreign policy, in other words a lack of consistency between rhetoric and practice. One such article appeared in a local newspaper on the lack of perceived consistency of the Swedish government on the Venezuelan election succession issue.

There we see what a feminist foreign minister is capable of doing in the country's foreign policy: intervening in another country's domestic policy and possibly contributing to overthrowing a socialist regime. Yes, it can go with a government that has a feminist foreign policy! And a foreign minister who doesn't understand better than Wallström. To say that you have a feminist foreign policy is a restriction on the border of pure stupidity. But Wallström and Löfven and co believe that feminism is everything, and thus nothing special. Then it can become quite headless. I do not think it is such a feminist foreign policy a majority of the Swedish people want.

[[Ronnby, 2019]]

This debate article came in response to the Swedish government's decision to support the United States and Donald Trump's insistence that the 'opposition' leader Juan Gaidó is the 'legitimate' interim president. It flows from the possible disillusion of the shattering of the notion or perception of an independent international role played by Sweden. There are various other foreign policy inconsistencies that have been pointed out, suffice

⁸ *Feminist Foreign Policy*, Swedish Government, <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/en-feministisk-utrikespolitik/>, no date given (accessed 7 February 2019). A handbook on Swedish feminist foreign policy was published in 2018 in Swedish, which can be found here: https://www.regeringen.se/4a4753/contentassets/25cdf346017489ca22bd55e74de22c4/handbok_sveriges-feministiska-utrikespolitik.pdf.

⁹ See page 11 on the following link (in Swedish)-<http://www.sprakochfolkminnen.se/download/18.cbc0f5b1499a212bbf1d2a/1529493983709/nyordslista%202014.pdf>.

to mention just a few of them here, to illustrate the glaring contradictions between word and deed. One of these incidents concerned the Swedish intention to build an advanced weapons factory and arms exports to Saudi Arabia (even after the murder of the Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul), which contradicts the values of the country's 'peaceful and positive contribution' to global politics and development (Lönnæus, 2015; Metro, 2012; Möller Berg, 2018). Another example, such as Sweden's active military role in NATO's Libya mission is another example, which does contradict the self-proclaimed non-aligned status of the country together with its much advertised 200 years of peace. It should be noted that the criticism is directed at certain tactical level events and not at the strategic level of the narrative and mission.

3. Conclusions

After being in a state of war very often and rising to be a Baltic Sea power through military aggression and expansion where Sweden seemed to defy its hard power limitations for centuries, the end did eventually come. These wars drained the Swedish economy and when other greater powers emerged, such as Russia, it cost the hard pressed Swedish empire and forced a re-think. The Napoleonic Wars cost Finland and Sweden's great power status, after Sweden allied with France against Russia. Sweden took on an increasingly 'neutral' stance in European conflicts, which has gradually given way to non-alignment. This has been subsequently developed as part of Sweden's international brand and its 'promise' as a member of the international community.

Sweden has used brands to try and influence global audiences' opinion and perception of the country in order to offset significant tangible constraints in terms of hard power capacity (related size of population, strength of the economy and strength of military). There has been an attempt to use the information domain to shape the cognitive domain through subjective representations of the physical domain to enable the country to punch above its weight in the international arena. This however, to an extent, relies on the enforcement of national consensus to project a sense of unity and purpose in an almost messianic mission to change the world for the better.

However, cracks are increasingly appearing in the domestic consensus as the contradictions of the humanitarian super brand and feminist foreign policy become increasingly visible, plus the effects of the twin crises of a weak economy and effects of mass migration increasingly delegitimize the country's elite and their political agenda. Attempts to maintain the corridor of opinion are becoming increasingly problematic, even when attempting to invoke the presumed power of the common value foundation.

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