

# FOREIGN-POLICY DISCUSSIONS IN SWEDEN AFTER 1990

## FROM NEUTRALITY TO NATO?

*Carl Johan Blydal*

Sweden's foreign policy has undergone fundamental changes since 1990.<sup>1</sup> Whilst having relied on neutrality both in foreign and security policy for almost two centuries and having sought to convey the impression of nonalignment during the East-West conflict, the country has actually been sending troops to NATO missions – most recently in Libya – for quite some time. Nevertheless, Sweden has not become a full member of the military alliance to this day. As the military isolation up to 1990 was mainly directed against the East, contrary to political statements, the rapprochement with the West in the area of security policy has been progressing relatively steadily and smoothly since 1990, under both Social Democrat and centre-right governments. However, in public political discussion the change has been neither fast nor smooth.

Over the course of several decades, the policy of neutrality metamorphosed from a security policy option to part of Swedish national identity. Social Democrat governments in particular justified various domestic and foreign policy positions with the country's neutrality. As a result, foreign policy also became part of the domestic dispute between Social Democrats and centre-right parties, particularly the liberal-conservative Moderate Party, which has been a member of the EPP Group since 1995. This dispute went back in large



Carl Johan Blydal is a freelance political scientist based in Berlin.

1 | This article is a summary of some of the findings of my dissertation "Außenpolitische Diskurse in Schweden nach 1990. Zwischen realer Sicherheitspolitik und idealisierter Neutralität", which I defended on 3 November 2010 at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities III of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. For a complete overview of the sources and literature used please see my doctoral thesis, which is due to be published in the near future.

part to the terms in office of the Social Democrat Prime Minister Olof Palme (1968-1976 and 1982-1986). Controversial issues from the Palme era were still influencing foreign-policy discussions long after 1990 and still have some influence today.

### **SWEDISH FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 1945**

**On the one hand Sweden regularly declared itself neutral during conflicts, on the other hand it consistently sought support from those major powers that were able to protect it from Russia.**

Subsequent to the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, Sweden, as a militarily weakened yet geographically protected small state, succeeded in keeping out of all the military conflicts of the last two centuries through a combination of foreign policy restraint, flexible rapprochement with various great powers and exploitation of the rivalries between them. To this end the Swedish elites pursued two strategies: On the one hand Sweden regularly declared itself neutral during conflicts involving the great powers in its immediate vicinity, while on the other hand consistently seeking support from those great powers that were able to protect it from Russia. Prior to 1871, Sweden found this support in the UK and France, after 1871 in the UK and the German Reich, and after 1945 in the USA. Sweden thus tactically veered between isolation in its foreign-policy and dependence in its security policy. This created a tension between a *realpolitik* that was subject to situational constraints on the one hand and to an idealistically proclaimed neutrality on the other. This tension has been preoccupying the Swedish people since the World Wars throughout the period of the East-West conflict and beyond.

At the end of World War II, Sweden found itself in a difficult situation in two respects due to developments in defence technology. First, it had lost the strategic advantage of large geographic distances due to rapid advances in aircraft and rocket technology. Secondly, a state the size of Sweden was no longer able to compete with the great powers and superpowers in terms of defence technology. Although Sweden did not want to give up its policy of nonalignment, it embarked on a secret cooperation with the USA and NATO in 1948 in the areas of defence technology and intelligence, which would continue throughout the East-West conflict. At the same time public understanding of the term neutrality underwent a slow transformation. Although hitherto strictly

applied as a foreign-policy instrument, neutrality thus took on two divergent meanings. In the foreign-affairs arena, Sweden merely announced that it would declare itself neutral within the sense of the term within the sphere of international law in the event of an international conflict. But besides this, appealing to future neutrality increasingly suggested a type of detachment from the conflicts of this world also in times of peace. This made it increasingly difficult to separate the cooperation with the West on security policy, which was founded in *realpolitik*, from announcements made for domestic policy reasons. The solution to this problem consisted of systematically keeping all activities that did not conform to the official policy of neutrality secret. Researchers have referred to this stance as hidden “re-insurance” or “dual-track policy”.<sup>2</sup>

The two most significant national security crises of those decades, the *Catilina* affair of 1952 and the submarine incidents of the 1980s, could therefore neither be explained domestically nor internationally. In 1952, Swedish military reconnaissance aircraft were shot down over the Baltic Sea while in Soviet airspace. These flights followed the flight paths of the U.S. and British air forces over the Baltic Sea, and the Swedish Air Force regularly sent its findings to NATO. But as this practice was contrary to official Swedish policy, governments were for decades unable to explain to the public what had happened there. It was a similar situation with the submarine incidents. Swedish coastal waters were of strategic importance to both power blocs in the event of war, which is why Swedish marine units joined various NATO states in holding military exercises in the area. There were several occasions in the 1980s when unknown submarines allegedly violated Swedish territorial waters. After a fully armed Soviet submarine had run aground in the waters off Sweden’s second most important marine base in 1981, a political argument erupted between the Social Democrat government and the centre-right opposition in subsequent years. The points at issue were the origin of the submarines as well as the right way to deal with the USSR. Current

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2 | Kjell Engelbrekt, “Den sjuttonde alliansmedlemmen?” (The seventeenth member of the alliance?), *Internationella Studier*, 4/1999, 61-72, 63 et seq.: “återförsäkringspolitik”, “dubbelpolitik”.

Minister for Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt managed to make a name for himself as a foreign-affairs politician crossing swords with Olof Palme over the matter. At the same time, Sweden made good use of the policy of neutrality from the late 1960s onwards to pursue an "active foreign policy" with moralist overtones towards both the West under the leadership of the USA and the socialist states under the leadership of the USSR. Particularly under Prime Minister Palme, Sweden thus frequently criticised both superpowers and sided demonstratively with the Third World at the UN.

The policy of neutrality included the concept of "credibility", *trovärdighet*. In order to ensure that the power blocs would take Sweden's neutrality seriously in the event of war, there could be no political statements made or journalistic debates

taking place that would question the people's unity in backing the policy of neutrality. However, not only NATO knew which way Sweden really leaned in terms of security policy. By the early 1960s at the latest, the USSR was

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aware of the full extent of Sweden's military collaboration with the West thanks to the espionage activities of Swedish Col. Stig Wennerström. And the Swedish governments were aware of this situation, too. In spite of this, they continued to adhere to the policy of "credibility". The result was a political climate that persisted until 1990, in which any criticism of the foreign policy of the – usually Social Democrat – government was regarded as akin to treason, or at least a threat to national security. This was aimed at both the communists and particularly the conservatives. In 1959, the Social Democrat government thus prevented the chairman of the conservative Rightist Party, Högerpartiet, Jarl Hjalmarsson from joining a Swedish UN delegation, explaining that he had jeopardised the credibility of the country's neutrality through his NATO-friendly statements and could therefore not represent Sweden on the international stage. Prime Minister Palme subsequently called his political adversary Carl Bildt a danger to national security when Bildt held the USSR responsible for the submarine incidents. Both conservative politicians publicly defended a political position that actually reflected facts, but that was officially rejected by the respective governments, and both disputes went on to strain relations between Moderates and Social Democrats for a long time. To the present day, mod-

erate politicians have not been able to shake off the feeling of having to defend themselves against the accusation by the Social Democrats that they are acting in an irresponsible manner where foreign affairs are concerned.

During the two decades following the end of the confrontation of systems after 1989/1990 Swedish foreign policy underwent a fundamental change. Sweden thus applied for EC membership in 1990, joined the NATO Partnership for Peace programme (PfP) in 1994, the EU and CFSP as well as the NATO Planning and Review Process (PARP) in 1995 and the CSDP as well as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) in 1997. Swedish troops served under NATO command in Bosnia and Kosovo, in Afghanistan and lately in Libya. In 1999, Sweden provided political support for NATO's air strikes against Serbia.

This development shows a steady transition from the official security policy in place during the times of the East-West conflict to the present-day official security policy. Collaboration between intelligence services has continued without interruption. After 1990, collaboration on matters of defence technology, which had previously seen Sweden as the only non-NATO member of the U.S. export control system CoCom, for instance, carried on within the Western European Armament Group (WEAG). Today, Sweden continues to collaborate closely with numerous NATO states in the area of defence technology. In cooperation with Germany, Sweden is now forging ahead with the concept of "pooling and sharing" within the EU, where several countries undertake joint defence equipment projects to save funds and make optimum use of resources. While military collaboration had to be conducted with the greatest of care before 1990, it subsequently took place in the open. It was not until after 1990, for instance, that the Swedish public found out that Swedish runways had been extended during the 1950s to provide landing sites for potential NATO bombers on their way to the USSR. Neither was the public aware of the existence of a dedicated telex line from Sweden to NATO air force headquarters in Wiesbaden, nor of plans to deploy high-ranking Swedish officers in NATO staff positions in the event of war until the end of the Cold War.

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Today, military exercises with NATO states can be held regularly and openly contrary to the situation before 1990. The rethinking in Swedish security policy post-1990 actually means that activities, which had previously taken place in secret and with restricted scope as they contradicted official policy, are now part of official security policy and conducted openly. In its endeavours in this area, Sweden has adapted its own structures to align with the NATO structures as closely as possible without actually becoming a NATO member. The Swedish Prime Minister has spoken of “genuine solidarity” as opposed to a purely formal alliance membership. In his view Sweden is now part of the “decision shaping” within NATO, albeit not of the “decision making”.

Sweden has done away with conscription and transformed the Swedish armed forces into something akin to an expeditionary army, which can, however, also perform territorial tasks. During the East-West conflict, Sweden

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However, Sweden also took advantage of these structural changes for quite some time to make cuts in the state budget. Under the influence of the Georgian war in August 2008, these cuts were partly reversed when it became clear to the Swedish onlookers that Russia could – still or once again – represent a military threat to its neighbours. Collaboration with NATO in the areas of training and exercises has been intensified since the 1990s and the skills of the Swedish armed forces applied during joint deployments are greatly appreciated by NATO. During the deployment in Libya, for instance, the Swedish Air Force supplied half the aerial reconnaissance for the Allies. When cooperating with its neighbours within the EU and NATO in the area of security policy, Sweden particularly stresses joint interests and close mutual relationships, for instance where regional tasks are to be performed, but it does not see the need for formal NATO membership.<sup>3</sup>

3 | Cf. e.g. Sten Tolgfors, “Anförande Föreningen Folk och försvars rikskonferens 2012” (Speech, Annual National Conference of Society and Defence 2012), 15 Jan 2012; Peter Hulqvist, „Anförande, Föreningen folk och försvars rikskonferens”, 15 Jan 2012, <http://folkochforsvar.se/index.php/rikskonferensen.html> (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

In this area too there has been a change in the official security policy doctrine. Once Sweden had declared in 1991 that it was inconceivable for it to remain neutral in the event that Russia attacked its Baltic neighbours, the official description of Swedish security policy no longer mentioned neutrality but exclusively the term nonalignment from 2003 onwards. And then in 2009, Sweden's unilateral declaration of solidarity with its neighbours complemented nonalignment to form the country's security policy doctrine. Apart from the declaration of solidarity, this development took place with the backing of all parliamentary factions. Only two of the parties represented in the Riksdag, the Moderate Party and the Liberal Party, are openly advocating NATO membership in 2012, with the Moderates also stressing that the decision to join NATO would require broad public support. The other two centre-right coalition partners, the Center Party and the Christian Democrats, argue against membership, but are in favour of close cooperation. The entire opposition, both the parties on the left, i.e. the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party and the Green Party, and the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats, argue against Sweden joining NATO. The idea that Sweden should act for peace in the world in cooperation with other states in the UN and the OSCE is still prevalent.<sup>4</sup>

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4 | Moderate Party: [http://moderat.se/web/Utrikespolitik\\_2.aspx](http://moderat.se/web/Utrikespolitik_2.aspx) (accessed 12 Apr 2012); Liberal Party: <http://folklpartiet.se/Var-politik/Vara-viktigaste-fragor/Sverige-i-varlden> (accessed 12 Apr 2012); Christian Democrats: <http://kristdemokraterna.se/VarPolitik/Politikomraden/ForsvarOchSakerhet> (accessed 12 Apr 2012); Center Party: <http://centerpartiet.se/Centerpolitik/Politikomraden/Forsvars--och-sakerhetspolitik/Politik-A---O/Alliansfrihet> (accessed 12 Apr 2012); Social Democrats: <http://socialdemokraterna.se/Var-politik/Var-politik-A-till-O/Forsvar-och-krisberedskap> (accessed 12 Apr 2012); Left Party: [http://vansterpartiet.se/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2805&catid=486&Itemid=857](http://vansterpartiet.se/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2805&catid=486&Itemid=857) (accessed 12 Apr 2012); Green Party: [http://mp.se/templates/mct\\_177.aspx?number=175058](http://mp.se/templates/mct_177.aspx?number=175058) (accessed 12 Apr 2012); Sweden Democrats: <http://sverigedemokraterna.se/vara-asikter/var-politika-till-o> (accessed 12 Apr 2012).

## FOREIGN POLICY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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The policy of neutrality has been part of Swedish national identity for several decades.<sup>5</sup> In the foreign-affairs arena, this self-image is characterised by ideas of Sweden as a particularly modern, progressive and just country. The conviction of being a country that is not only exemplary but also particularly generous has been legitimising Sweden's involvement in distant parts of the world since the 1970s and 1980s. And political neutrality also definitely goes hand in hand with a certain consciousness of a national mission, a "modernity nationalism"<sup>6</sup>. According to this way of thinking, Sweden, as the most highly developed country in the world, virtually has a mission to help others in their efforts to develop. Strongly linked to a social democratic world view, this idea of Swedish modernity can still be found in all sections of the population.

In fact, public debate in Swedish society has seen two fundamentally opposing views of social developments since the early 1970s, one tending towards social democratic ideas and the other tending towards liberal/centre-right ones. With reference to foreign affairs, social democracy described Sweden's role in the world as that of a pioneer of development and as a model for all other peoples, a role that was safeguarded through responsible Social Democrat leadership. This responsible acting also ensured that everything that was done in the name of the neutrality policy was in the best interest of the country and in conformance with the publicly stated policy. The centre-right camp contradicted this view. Instead, they saw Sweden as a country with many difficulties, and therefore viewed the claim to be an international model as immoderate Social Democrat arrogance. They criticised the dual-track security policy pursued during the Cold War as a breach of the public's

5 | The term "national identity" in this context is not meant to represent an unchanging "national character" but merely ideas that are widespread within a particular society for long periods of time.

6 | Alf W. Johansson, "Inledning: Svensk nationalism och identitet efter andra världskriget" (Introduction: Swedish nationalism and identity after the Second World War), in: idem (ed.), *Vad är Sverige? Röster om svensk nationell identitet*, Stockholm 2001, 8: "modernitetsnationalism".



trust in neutrality and as a result of a fundamentally hypocritical stance.

With the election victory of the centre-right coalition in 2006 and the decreasing influence of the Social Democratic Party, the lines of conflict in social debate have shifted. Sweden's sense of mission is persisting in spite of the major upheavals in the international situation and in national foreign affairs and in spite of 20 years of complaints that Sweden has come down from its position as a model for the world and become a "normal" country. But for outsiders it is difficult to say whether the current government led by Fredrik Reinfeldt really shares this view and has therefore accepted originally Social Democrat positions, or whether it has merely adjusted its own stance to match voters' expectations.

#### **THE DEBATES ON CHANGES IN FOREIGN POLICY 1990-2006**

The changes happening in Central and Eastern Europe after 1990 and the ensuing new foreign policy options no doubt represented a step change in Sweden's foreign-policy debate. When Sweden was faced with the fundamental issue of EU membership in the early 1990s, the discussion about Sweden's uniqueness was whipping up feelings. They had to debate the degree to which political, economic and social harmonisation with other western states was necessary, desirable or acceptable. This debate brought out tensions within society that manifested in different assessments of questions concerning Sweden's alliance membership, nonalignment and EU membership, concerning a pro-USA and pro-Israel stance as well as international restraint or involvement. Immediately after the wall had fallen, after the Eastern European revolutions and the end of the confrontation of systems, Sweden also experienced a great social need to come to terms with the recent past. Although the East-West conflict and the associated foreign affairs activities had largely lost their critical significance in day-to-day political life, the conflict still remained an important reference point in foreign policy discussions for two decades. In these discussions, people drew on the Cold War and the

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history of Sweden's neutrality to come to conclusions for the present situation or to make political decisions.

How to handle the topic of the submarine incidents was another part of the foreign policy debate. The potential threat to Swedish waters from foreign submarines had represented a controversial topic in political discussions since the early 1980s. Both their origin and their very existence quickly evolved into a polarising issue, which was mainly fought out between Social Democrats and Moderates. Whereas the submarine incidents exemplified the weakness of Social Democrat foreign policy for centre-right commentators, the submarine issue remained almost synonymous with the name of Carl Bildt in the eyes of the political Left. In public awareness, Bildt's political profile is based on his skirmishes with Olof Palme in the submarine debate of the early 1980s. Due to his rise to party chairman and Prime Minister, Bildt came to symbolise centre-right criticism of Olof Palme's security policy to the political Left.

Another disputed issue was the question of Sweden's role in the world. Those leaning towards social democratic views continued to maintain even after 1990 that Sweden had an important role to play as an intermediary and that Sweden remained nonaligned. The Centre Right argued instead that

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Sweden should seek rapprochement with its European neighbours and turn away from adventures in the Third World. Those in favour of Palme's foreign policy defended it against accusations of hypocrisy and double stand-

ards in the 1990s, stating that Sweden had actually always pursued nonalignment based on *realpolitik*. People on the centre right continued to believe even long after 2000 that it was still not possible to have a free and open debate on the subject of security policy in Sweden. A topic that in principle belonged very much to the past, like the submarine incidents of the 1980s, still had considerable relevance for the present over two decades, in particular for Carl Bildt, who was still being criticised during his term as Minister for Foreign Affairs in 2007/2008 because of actions dating back to his time as an MP. He was specifically accused of having lied with respect to the origin of the submarines, as they had either been non-existent or had originated from NATO and not the USSR. Former participants in the submarine debate

of the 1980s also took the opportunity of settling some old scores. The submarine topic thus formed a part of Sweden's security policy discussions for nearly three decades.

An extremely lively debate on issues of foreign and security policy began in 1990 and continues to this day. When one examines the course of the debate it is clear that virtually identical arguments have been put forward over two decades. But things become especially interesting when proponents of a political view use the pattern of argumentation of the other side to make their point. One example of this is an article by Defence Minister Sten Tolgfors promoting entry into NATO, in which he used expressions that had previously formed part of the Social Democrats' foreign policy reasoning. He thus described NATO as a "broad organisation for security" with "responsibility for international peace and security", i.e. as something that was meant to elicit thoughts of the familiar UN in people's minds.<sup>7</sup> One can also see certain terms still being used as code. "Submarine periscope" still represents the threat posed by Russia or at least by a foreign major power. Finally, a reference to the dual-track policy of the Cold War is almost automatically considered evidence of a positive stance towards entry into NATO or at least of a rejection of Social Democrat policies.

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## CHANGES SINCE 2006

There has been a centre-right coalition in power for over five years now. This raises the question as to whether the political trenches in the landscape of the description of society, which had existed since the early 1970s, have eroded with the change in government in 2006 or remain intact. There are many indications of a rhetoric synthesis emerging in the period from 2004 to 2006, when the four parties of the centre-right alliance agreed on a joint election program, in which older elements of Swedish identity were used in conjunction with terms previously monopolised by the Social Democrats to disseminate centre-right ideas. One example of this was an announcement by the

7 | Sten Tolgfors, "Medlemskap i NATO naturligt", *SvD*, 16 Feb 2008: "bred organisation för säkerhet", "ansvar för internationell fred och säkerhet".

Secretary General of the Moderate Party, which he made without a hint of irony, that the “New Moderates” would become “Sweden’s society-supporting party” in the future.<sup>8</sup>

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It was actually the Moderates in particular who had previously often criticised as arrogance the self-image of the Social Democrats of a “state-supporting party”. And the idea of Sweden’s uniqueness appears to be so solidly anchored in the national self-image that Prime Minister Reinfeldt himself is now talking of the “pioneering country of Sweden”.<sup>9</sup> Is it therefore possible that Sweden can only be governed with the aid of the classic Swedish self-image, which has an affinity with social democratic ideas? Bildt failed in an earlier attempt to enforce an anti-social-democratic description of society.

To make themselves electable in 2006, the four centre-right parties needed to harmonise their points of view on the one hand and adapt both their contents and their language to the “social democratic” expectations of the electorate on the other. In these efforts the Moderates picked up on long-established ideas in the areas of both domestic and foreign affairs. Military deployments of Swedish troops under NATO command from Bosnia to Libya, for instance, are often described using traditional UN imagery, i.e. as blue helmet deployments, as it has been a matter of course for Sweden to regularly make blue helmet soldiers available to the UN over the last six decades. The ever-increasing military harmonisation is explained as a deepening of international cooperation. And the government makes a point of stressing that continued security policy harmonisation, for instance with its Scandinavian neighbours, would not restrict Sweden’s scope for action in the foreign affairs arena.<sup>10</sup>

8 | Per Schlingmann, “Vi ska aktivt ta väljare från socialdemokraterna” (We are actively going to gain voters from the Social Democrats), *DN*, 12 Aug 2010: “Sveriges samhällsbärande parti”.

9 | Fredrik Reinfeldt and Moa Berglöf, *Framåt tillsammans. Min berättelse om föregångslandet Sverige*, Stockholm, 2010: “föregångslandet Sverige”.

10 | On the official explanation of Swedish security policy: <http://regeringen.se/sb/d/514> (accessed 12 April 2012).

In mid-2009, the security policy principle that “no-one else will defend Sweden and we shall only defend Sweden”<sup>11</sup>, as expressed by Prime Minister Carl Bildt in the early 1990s, was at long last formally rejected by the Riksdag. It was replaced by a unilateral promise to provide military support to neighbouring countries, linked to the hope that if needed Sweden would receive assistance in return. This means that the only thing remaining from the policy of nonalignment following the end of neutrality is the absence of a signature on an alliance agreement. This is sure to influence the self-image of the Swedish people and ultimately lead to new definitions of its own identity. But for now we can only guess as to how, to what extent and over what period of time this will happen. Be that as it may, the notion of Sweden as a model for the world to follow will quite probably remain with us for some time.

## **OUTLOOK: SWEDEN AND ITS ENTRY INTO NATO**

22 years after the end of the Cold War and Sweden’s application for entry into the EU, ideas from Olof Palme’s time at the political helm are still playing a role in discussions on foreign policy in Sweden. After the change in government in 2006, the debate on foreign policy matters between the Centre Right, most notably the Moderates, and the Social Democrats was no longer conducted with the same degree of ferocity as it was in the days of Carl Bildt’s term in office. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, the Moderates are conducting themselves in a different manner than that prevalent under his predecessors, to include discussions of foreign policy. There are indications that the official description of the security policy is also slowly approximating the security policy as it is actually conducted. Whether this will lead to Sweden joining NATO in the foreseeable future is, however, doubtful. Since the end of the East-West conflict, Swedish parties and governments have pointed out time and again how important it is to have public support for the country’s foreign and security policies.

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11 | Carl Bildt, speech in the Riksdag, 15 Jan 1992, <http://riksdagen.se/webbnav/index.aspx?nid=101&dokid=GF0952&et=1991/92:52>: „Ingen annan försvarar Sverige och vi försvarar bara Sverige.“ (accessed 12 April 2012).

Up to 1990, governments encouraged a view of security policy amongst the population that did not match the facts. The so-called “anchoring in the population”, *folklig förankring*, was used as evidence and justification for the policy of neutrality. Although one has to ask what this anchoring related to: the policy of neutrality, the well-known rhetoric or merely neutrality in the sense of “independence”. Seeing that large parts of the population would have gladly accepted assistance from the West in the event of war, where did the “anchoring” of the policy of neutrality actually manifest, particularly in the event of an attack by the USSR? Today, reference is still made to “broad anchoring” – its purpose is to give the government coalition time, to relieve it from the burden of having to make a decision.