

Sweden and the Baltic in the 1990s Background and new positions

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In the years between the wars The Baltic Sea became more or less a cultural and economic unity and in many ways also a flourishing region though it was by no means an idyllic time with Hitler in the south and Stalin in the east. But there was in many ways around the Baltic Sea a feeling of a Baltic identity, a common "Geschichtsbewußtsein".

WW II totally changed all this and after WW II there was the Cold War. The exchange of ideas or opinions or cultural relations across the Baltic Sea disappeared and the Baltic became a point of intersection between WP and NATO and an electronic battlefield with repeated incidents.

The Swedish foreign policy during the Cold War period was characterised by the theme "non alignment in peace leading to neutrality in war". This policy which was inaugurated by the Swedish minister of foreign affairs in the end of the 1940s, became more or less a dogm above any discussion.

The Swedish policy of neutrality during the Cold War had as a result that the Swedish foreign policy in many ways left the European aspect aside because that could be interpreted as an involvement in either NATO or WP. Instead the Swedish foreign policy came in many ways to deal with global, not European affairs. Thus Sweden took a great - not to say very great - interest in countries like South Africa, Chile, Cuba and Nicaragua.

In 1989 the Cold War was over. The Baltic area was confronted with dramatic changes and returned so to speak to basics, that is to the open world of the times before WW II. The Baltic Sea was once again uniting rather than separating the countries surrounding it.

For Sweden this changed Baltic world had important consequences leading to a reappraisal of the old politics. This reappraisal led to new positions based on the old pre-war Swedish view of the importance of the Baltic area economically and culturally and - not the least - politically. But as far as foreign policy was concerned there was also a certain amount of insecurity. The dogm of neutrality policy was no longer taboo and a political debate about neutrality started almost immediately after "die Wende". The main political parties in Sweden were, however, more or less united in their view towards the Baltic region even though there could be a difference in degree in the words expressing the views in question.

The question is what kind of Swedish foreign policy is there to be in the Baltic area? The answer could be that as a member of the EU since 1994 Sweden can help the three Baltic states in their growing new independence. The discussion in Sweden about the three Baltic states and Poland as well as about their membership in the EU came to an end when Sweden became a member itself. The main Swedish political parties became united in their positive views towards the EU membership of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

The question about NATO remained. The Baltic states and Poland want to become NATO members. In Sweden NATO became a hot potatoe, but according to a Swedish international

military tradition in the UN Sweden became a member in Partnership for Peace. The Swedish government, however, stresses at present (1996) that a Swedish membership in NATO is of no current interest.

In an article in the journal "Survival" edited by the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London in 1996 there is a discussion about NATO's role in the future of the Baltic. The study was made by the wellknown American thinktank Rand in Santa Barbara in California. The conclusion of this study is that in the near future only Poland will be a NATO member. The three Baltic states will not be members because of the strong Russian opposition. According to the author Finland and Sweden should take the military and security responsibility for the three Baltic states and that part of the Baltic region would then be an kind of zone of its own.

This study has been heavily opposed by the Swedish government as well as Finland's. The Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs has pointed out that the creation of such a grey zone is not only dangerous in the European context but also opposed to the interests of the three Baltic states. They want to be full members of EU and of NATO.

The Swedish position could be summarised in the following way. It is vital to avoid the creation of a grey zone outside EU and outside NATO. Sweden will do all in its powers to help the three Baltic states to become members of the EU. Their NATO membership must come later because of Russia's resistance. A Swedish membership in NATO is not of current interest.

When all this is said the attention must be focused on another extremely important problem with this changed Baltic world: The Baltic Sea constitutes today a very great welfare gap, maybe one of the greatest in the world. In especially Russia, Latvia und Lithuania the decrease in the standard of living from the times before "die Wende" is substantial. This is something that must be taken into consideration when we talk about changes and new positions in the Baltic area.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has in a way created what can be called a new popular movement in Sweden. Individuals, municipalities, cities and organisations of different kinds like Rotary, the Salvation Army, the Church of Sweden and many of its parishes and - not the least - the universities have started all kinds of collaboration projects with the countries on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. Only in the Stockholm area there are at present (1996) more than 1500 such projects, some small some big. Most projects deal with ecology, social work and culture.

The Baltic region can in many ways become the bridge between East and West in Europe and few countries in Europe are more interested in creating this bridge than Sweden. The new Swedish positions are to include the whole Baltic area - that is the three Baltic states, Poland, Russia and also Belorussia in an economic policy leading to a Baltic network. This will also - Sweden thinks - influence the security and military policy of the countries around the Baltic. There is a vision not only in Sweden that his region will one day follow the Nordic example with close cooperation, informal debates and near social contacts.

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