

Sweden and the erosion of the nuclear taboo

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Since the beginning of January this year, a debate on nuclear deterrence has been under way in Sweden. In late February, the Minister for Defence, Pål Jonson, expressed the view that nuclear weapons should be permitted to be deployed on Swedish territory in wartime, without specifying which state's weapons he had in mind. In early February, Sweden's Chief of Defence, General Michael Claesson, indicated that the development of a European nuclear deterrence should be considered as part of efforts to reduce future military dependence on the United States. At the end of January, Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson confirmed that Stockholm is engaged in discussions with Paris and London regarding the possible extension of their nuclear umbrellas to other European states.

The statements by Swedish political leaders have been accompanied by an intense media debate concerning the possible development of a Swedish or Nordic nuclear weapons. This discussion gained momentum following the publication, on 10 January, of an article in the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter* entitled 'No one wants to discuss Swedish nuclear weapons – but we must'. According to the authors, the unpredictability of US security policy, coupled with the prospect of unfavourable domestic political developments in France and the United Kingdom, necessitates opening a debate on nuclear deterrence in Northern Europe. In their view, Sweden should play a leading role in this discussion, given its expertise in civilian nuclear energy, its experience of pursuing own military nuclear programme in the 1960s, and its highly advanced arms industry.

At present, Sweden relies on allied nuclear deterrence provided by the United States. However, the government has expressed interest in discussions with France and the United Kingdom regarding the Europeanisation of their nuclear deterrence. There is currently no political or societal support in Sweden for the development of a national or Nordic nuclear weapons. Swedish politicians' recent decisions (such as participation in NATO's SNOWCAT exercises) and public statements concerning the possible deployment of (NATO or French) nuclear weapons on Swedish territory in wartime signal an intention to break the country's anti-nuclear taboo upheld since the abandonment of Sweden's military nuclear programme in the late 1960s.

Commentary

- **Since joining NATO in 2024, Sweden has been covered by the allied nuclear deterrence provided by the United States.** At the time of accession, the then Social Democratic government declared that it had not agreed to the deployment of nuclear weapons on Swedish territory – a position that was also supported by the now-governing parties,

which were then in opposition. This reservation reflected the strength of the domestic anti-nuclear movement. Following its entry into NATO, Stockholm became a member of the Nuclear Planning Group, which is responsible for shaping the Alliance's nuclear deterrence policy. In October 2025, Swedish JAS 39 Gripen aircraft participated for the first time in NATO's SNOWCAT exercises, providing conventional support (escort and protection) for NATO's nuclear missions. Although neither the United States nor France plans to permanently station nuclear weapons in Sweden, they do not rule out the possibility of overflights of Swedish territory or the temporary basing of allied aircraft carrying nuclear bombs. The Defence Minister's statement in February therefore marks a departure from Sweden's long-standing anti-nuclear taboo. According to a Novus public opinion survey conducted in January of this year, 55% of respondents oppose the deployment of US nuclear weapons in Sweden, while 41% support such a move.

- **There is currently no political or public support in Sweden for the development of own nuclear weapons or for the establishment of a Nordic nuclear deterrent. However, Stockholm is open to strengthening the European dimension of French and British nuclear umbrella, as well as to engaging in discussions on a broader European nuclear deterrence.** In the 1950s and 1960s, Sweden pursued a national military nuclear programme while simultaneously expanding its civilian nuclear energy sector. Pursuing the development of own nuclear weapons was ultimately discontinued in the late 1960s due to economic, politico-military, and societal factors. For a neutral state such as Sweden, the simultaneous development of nuclear weapons and substantial conventional forces during the Cold War proved financially unsustainable. Divisions within the then-ruling Social Democratic Party deepened over this course of action, and public opposition increased. Moreover, in the 1960s Stockholm secretly received security assurances from the United States – including nuclear guarantees – in the event of a conflict with the Soviet Union. Today, Sweden retains significant technological expertise (with three nuclear power plants operating on its territory), but it does not maintain key elements of the nuclear fuel cycle. Westinghouse Electric Company operates a subsidiary in Sweden, including a fuel fabrication facility in Västerås that produces fuel assemblies but does not engage in uranium enrichment. Public support for the development of national nuclear weapons remains low: 68% of respondents in a Novus survey oppose such a move, while 17% endorse it.
- **After abandoning its military nuclear programme in the 1960s, Sweden became a leading advocate of nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament.** Its initiatives in this field at the United Nations helped pave the way for the signing of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1968. Stockholm has since acted as both an initiator and an active participant in a range of other agreements and treaties in this domain, most recently the 2019 Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament. The Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) is actively engaged in nuclear arms control efforts, including participation in the global monitoring system for nuclear tests operated by the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO). Following the parliamentary election scheduled for September 2026, and in the event of a victory by the Social Democrats and other left-wing parties, issues of non-proliferation and nuclear arms control may again gain greater prominence. At the same time, Sweden's

commitment to NATO's nuclear deterrence and its participation in discussions with Paris and London will continue.