Security as Nation Branding: Sweden's Status-Seeking Strategy

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In a globalised world, not only firms but countries are made more competitive and attractive by powerful state and non-state actors. Such actors frequently use nation branding as a socio-political instrument to build an image and evoke a positive impression to enhance competitive advantage in transnational markets of goods, services, and reputation (Anzera, Gianturco, and Massa 2019). Nation branding, however, is complex, covering political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, it entails strategic action and contains consciously pursued activities that do not occur randomly but are initiated by someone for some purpose.

Nation brands are crude depictions of national identities because 'brands are designed to be more stable [and] are inherently less nuanced and therefore represent a closing down, and simplified representation of national identities' (Clegg and Kornberger 2010, 9). As Aronczyk (2008) noted, branding is primordial in the sense that it excludes a broader diversity of competing national identity narratives because it 'concerns the construction of [. . .] narratives which are necessarily selective in what they include and leave out', that is, 'non-neutral stories of a perceived objectively existing nation' (Jezierska and Towns 2018, 56). Overall, nation branding is about the competition of storytelling of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983; Winder 2020). In this context, storytelling is crucial to elicit an emotional resonance to a place (van Ham 2001) and emotional ties to the 'political philosophy of a nation and what that nation might stand for' (Browning 2015, 201).

Over the past twenty years or so, nation branding has increasingly entangled the security sphere. Security is essential in 'promoting places and nations' (Mihaila 2015, 427) because security is a scarce commodity (Avraham and Ketter 2008; Coaffee and van Ham 2008). The lion's share of the security branding literature has focused on how regions, states, places and, on occasion, private actors actively pursue a perceived need to appear secure and safe. It is argued that the simple logic driving such compulsion is that insecurity can damage a place's brand and reputation. Less explored in this literature is the inverse relationship between how peaceful and so-called progressive places use their image to frame, sell and legitimise security products and services despite the negative images, discourses and consequences often associated with such matters. In a recent study, I lead a collaborative investigation to analyse a country at the forefront of actively pursuing such an image and following such strategic processes, namely Sweden (Coetzee, Larsson, and Berndtsson 2023).

Since the mid-1990s, there has been a concerted effort by powerful state and non-state actors to crystalise a type of nationalistic storytelling of Swedishness (Pamment and Cassinger 2018). Swedishness is not an empty concept but a large tent and home to a wide range of substantive orientations. Progressiveness is the key theme that encapsulates this broader idea of Swedishness and the thread connecting various tropes associated with that idea. These tropes include, amongst other things, Sweden's long history of military non-alignment and of being recognised as a "neutral" country, generous foreign aid policies, international solidarity, gender equality, conflict mediation, social welfare, and environmentalism. It is, therefore, unsurprising to see that "progressiveness" shapes the official Sweden brand.

Since 2007, Sweden has formally adopted a nation brand, defining itself as a progressive country (Swedish Institute 2008). In addition to the term progressive, the keywords underlying the official brand are 'open', 'authentic', 'caring'

and 'innovative', which, it is suggested, has become the bedrock of Sweden's value-based image and formal nation branding strategy. Without injecting value judgements of our own, our study took inspiration from the various notions above regarding Swedishness and the central theme of progressiveness – not only how it is informed by the official Swedish brand (as designed and maintained by the Swedish Institute, the organisation responsible for managing the brand) but also how traits believed to represent it have been recognised, reproduced, and framed by others. We worked this through in a case study to elucidate the production and framing of Swedish progressiveness by defence industry-related actors.

Sweden is an interesting case because, since the mid-1900s, it has had a significant arms industry supporting its so-called Total Defence Model – a security approach (and policy orientation) demanding "that all of society", both military and civilian, are engaged in the defence effort. Such an approach also entails a close collaboration between the government, the private sector, and the wider public. Rather uniquely for its size, Sweden produces weapon systems for all military branches – air, land, and sea – domestically, largely thanks to significant investments into military research and development (Stenlås 2008). When Sweden's security policy was reprioritised and defence budgets diminished in the 1990s and 2000s, major arms companies were forced to internationalise and focus increasingly on exports. This impetus makes the Swedish industry a significant player in the global arms trade today and places it in the unusual company of some of the most powerful states in the world. At the same time, the Swedish policymaking elite has also attempted to carve out a niche reputation for the country over the years as a 'moral hegemon' (Brommesson 2007), 'moral superpower' (Dahl 2006), or 'conscience of the world' (Engh 2009).

In our study, we treated Sweden's public and private security actors as two sides of the same coin because, historically, these actors have been unusually intertwined concerning arms production and export. In other words, our study assumed that public and private interests do not compete side by side or in a dichotomy but that they are fundamentally embedded due to the long history of corporatism and deep interdependencies between the state's defence sector and certain weapons manufacturers (Coetzee 2017; Coetzee and Berndtsson 2023). The central empirical focus of our analysis was "Team Sweden" – an organisation and marketing platform gathering the public and private actors responsible for, amongst other things, arms export promotion.

Our study's findings showed that the case of Sweden is a striking example where state and non-state defence industry-related actors strategically frame and co-produce loosely configured narratives of "progressiveness" as a key trope of Swedishness to extract profits from its circulation and consumption. Examples of associating forms of progressiveness with the brand name Sweden include Team Sweden habitually displaying the Swedish children's book character Pippi Longstocking at international defence industry exhibitions, which aims to reflect Sweden's self-image and belief in its arms industry as technologically capable as small but strong (see also Larsson 2019). It also includes how the policymaking elite actively distinguishes itself from other significant arms-exporting states by signalling to buying nations that Sweden is the "good guy" because it pursues a policy that is driven by "doing good" and "being good" in the world. They do the latter by invoking Sweden's history of supporting liberation struggle movements, respect for human rights, gender equality, humanitarianism, international aid, and, until recently, neutrality and military non-alignment. This laundry list of progressive actions is assumed to make Sweden a principled arms trade partner and a responsible security actor on the world stage. Connected to the latter is the active framing of Sweden's security industry as progressive in the sense of being transparent and well-regulated. This is seen in how key stakeholders use Sweden's comparatively strict arms export law as a form of marketing and a unique selling point. Here, state and non-state defence industry-related actors convey the message that if you buy weapons from Sweden, it will at least be "by the book".

The above and other reported practices are perhaps uncontroversial because states must increasingly employ new and diverse strategies to succeed in the ultra-competitive environment of the conventional arms trade. Nevertheless, the case of Sweden clearly illustrates how the branding of so-called progressive security is about status-seeking in the international hierarchy of arms-exporting states between the hypermodern and progressive and the rest. The question, however, remains: how exclusive is this "Swedish model" of security as nation branding? One could argue "not a lot, but also quite a bit".

The social media stories and marketing strategies of the arms industry and the Swedish government rely on bombast

to display, on the one hand, visions of technological superiority and, on the other, almost "benevolent narratives". Consider, for example, how Sweden's most significant weapons manufacturing company, Saab, displays its products at large exhibition spaces and expo halls in typical Scandinavian environments like vast archipelagos or snow-covered mountain ranges. Emphasising Sweden's "tough" climate is an oft-used marketing trope by the company, as they tend to highlight how cold weather and complex coastal waters are "no match" for Saab's exceptionally rugged products and systems. At the same, and to contribute to the defence industry's overall framing of Swedishness at these events and on other platforms, the company's vision and mission in recent years is that 'It is a human right to feel safe' (Saab 2020). While such statements may be considered superficial or common marketing slogans corporations use, their discursive implications are more profound. These branding practices aim to conflate nostalgia for "good old neutral Sweden" and the operations of a militarised state with the perceived ideals of Swedish mediation, honest brokership, and overall, as a significant contributor to frameworks promoting so-called ethical and peaceful methods globally. Here, one could argue that Sweden's past and present are fused to shape its meticulous branding strategies.

The broader implications of the processes reported in this article are that the manufacturing and export of weapons products have become embedded societal symbols of Swedish identity. One of the significant messages of my broader research over the years regarding Sweden's security as nation branding is that this "brand" comprises reputation building, domestic self-presentation, and identity building. Analysing these branding strategies 'enables us to see that foreign policy is not simply about interreacting with others but also entails communicating values and identity narratives to citizens' (Browning 2015, 196). In that sense, the conventional arms trade is far more than just procurement for and production of military hardware because the supplier is not just selling a product but a broad-based "national package." More specifically, when Swedish elites sell defence products and services, they are selling more than war materiel; they are selling an idea – in this case, a quintessential idea of Swedishness, which is perceived and projected by both insiders and outsiders as something better and different from others.

However, my most significant research finding into Sweden's security as nation branding is how "trust" plays a vital role in these branding strategies (Coetzee 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021). Trust, I found, is one of the most essential ingredients for engaging in sensitive weapons industry cooperation. The latter speaks directly to critical ingredients of broader nation branding practices. For example, Anholt (2010) points out how trust raises expectations of integrity and competence of a nation brand; van der Westhuizen (2003) demonstrates how trust allows nation brands to reverberate globally; Browning (2015) notes the importance of trust for creating 'safe' nation brand identities; and Giddens (1991) argues that trustworthiness is essential for managing a general sense of ontological security. Concerning the latter point, the more profound relevance of such findings is that inasmuch as weapons provide a sense of order and physical security in an ever-changing world, these products are also conceived as an ideological lynchpin for securing and even bolstering self-identity as well as build a sense of self-esteem, dignity, legitimacy, and, most importantly, status.

The burgeoning literature on nation branding has provided crucial insights into the social power of states and how various actors use and circulate nation brand tropes for political and commercial goals. Yet, as indicated above, the matter of arms trade is still largely overlooked in much of this and related research, especially regarding the Nordic region and other so-called "progressive" countries. In that context, more comparative research is needed to establish the similarities and differences between these states' security branding practices. More work is also needed to assess the challenges these states face. For example, how do states with relatively large but extremely advanced weapons export industries who have cultivated a self-image as so-called "international humanitarians" deal with the difficult question of short-term commercial and political gains vis-à-vis longer-term foreign policy goals? Such research is relevant because arms trade is intimately linked to broader peace and development issues. Regarding Sweden, future research should also consider how Sweden's NATO application will influence the branding of its security products and services, especially considering the deteriorating security situation in Europe and elsewhere.

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