Identity and Foreign Policy: Competing Narratives in Swedish State Autobiographies

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Sweden has long promoted the deep running self-perception of its socially and politically progressive nature as a nation, a perception clearly visible in the eagerness of the Swedish state to project itself as a force for peace and equality in the world. In line with this self-image, the Swedish government announced its explicitly feminist foreign policy (FP) in 2014 – first of its kind. Yet, Sweden's simultaneous role as a significant global weapons manufacturer has fundamentally disrupted the narrative templates of non-violence and collective security that inform the feminist foreign policy identity. To understand the role of identity in this battle over Sweden's foreign relations, in what follows I combine the insights gained from biographical narrative and role conception approaches to foreign policy behaviour, with special attention to processes of domestic contestation and the strategic manipulation and negotiation of national narratives. By so doing, I explore the competing narrative frames, each drawing on key historical Swedish role conceptions, that animate the ongoing dispute between Swedish arms export promotors and feminist foreign policy practitioners.

Through paying attention to the strategic *re*framing of the same narrative templates and central role identities by both factions, though for competing political (and economic) purposes, I analyse how and to what extent continued arms exports pose a challenge to the identity of Swedish feminist foreign policy, in theory as well as in practice. The confidence and legitimacy of Sweden's feminist FP agenda continues to hang by a thin thread due to its inability to deal with the opposite biographical narratives of Sweden as a neutral state, dependent on its vast defence industry and arms exporting relations.

Locating Identity in Foreign Policy

Identity has enjoyed an increasingly central place in International Relations (IR) and relevant sub-field literature concerning state action and foreign policy behaviour since the late 1980s (see Berenskoetter 2010, Epstein 2010, Hopf 2005, Khan 2017, Laffey 2000, Lebow 2016, Ringmar 1996). IR and related scholars – including role identity theorists and foreign policy analysts – were interested in how to explain the formation of collective identities, such as national communities and the role of identitarian claims in shaping state internal and external policy formulation (Aggestam 1999, Holsti 1970, Hopf 2005). To this end, they found inspiration in poststructural and social-psychological approaches to how experiences of Self and Other are formed and identification processes take place (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Building on such literature, I am especially interested in the ways in which state actors construct and draw on collective narrative templates to provide a sense of ontological security and legitimise either policy perpetuation or change through references to commonplace national role conceptions and state autobiographies (Berenskoetter 2014, Holsti 1970, Subotic 2016, Walker 1987).

'State "autobiographies" [are] stories states tell to and about themselves' (Subotic 2016, 611). Similarly, narratives constitute tools through which any individual or collective identity seeks to establish a sense of existential coherence and meaning – deriving from the Heideggerian phenomenological concept of *being-in-the-world* (see Berenskoetter 2014, 264). To construct a sense of stability and purpose, communities draw on biographical narratives which situate them in a spatial-temporal context utilising experiences from the past to explain current predicaments and formulate a collective vision for the future (Berenskoetter 2014, 278-9). However, it is important to note that state narratives and

national biographies are never wholly consensual or uncontested and build on multiple narrative templates which different actors can draw on in different times for different purposes. Subotic (2016) has shown that political and civil agents remodel hegemonic national narratives to legitimise necessary policy changes without losing a sense of ontological stability, underpinning the always multilayered nature of schematic narrative templates. 'Strategic rhetorical action' thus allows 'political actors and narrative entrepreneurs' to implicate policy changes within existing templates reframing them 'in a way that emphasizes some parts of the story and conveniently forgets others' (Subotic 2016, 611).

The literature on national role conceptions and their ability to shape FP directions draw on similar socio-psychological approaches to state behaviour and world politics as biographical narratives. Following Aggestam (1999, I) 'a role conception is a set of norms expressing expected foreign policy behaviour and action orientation' which 'can be thought of as a "road map" that foreign policy-makers rely on to simplify and facilitate an understanding of a complex political reality'. Similarly, Holsti (1970, 242) has shown how states are categorised according to the role(s) they seek to and/or are expected to fulfil in the international system, leaving practitioners aware of 'international status distinctions' in ways that affect policy decision-making. However, like individual identities and relationships states assume different roles in different relations and always risk falling short on delivering expected role performances, at times due to disputed interpretations of the meaning of any one role (Holsti 1970, 241-7). Consequently, as with biographical narratives, the construction and mobilisation – including narrativization – of national roles is under constant negotiation. Improving the understanding of agent-structure relations in IR subfields, Cantir and Kaarbo (2012) have demonstrated that role conceptions as expressed in FP decisions are liable to contestation 'both vertically (between elites and masses) and horizontally (among elites) and … these conflicts affect foreign policy decision making and foreign policy behaviour' (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 5). Before applying the aforementioned approaches to the case at hand, the following sections will briefly lay out the empirical contexts of Swedish arms export and Foreign Minister Margot Wallström's feminist FP foundations.

A Swedish Arms' Tale

Since the 2000s, Swedish exports of weapons and dual use products have tripled in revenue, making Sweden one of the biggest global arms exporters per capita (SPAS, n.d.). The overall revenue from military strategic exports went from 8.0 in 2014 to 11.4 billion SEK in 2018, and they continue to grow (SPAS, n.d.). Swedish exports systematically reach non-democratic, human rights violating or conflict engaged states including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Brunei, Qatar, Turkey, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Singapore and Algeria (Wezemen et. al. 2017, SPAS n.d.). Whilst 2000 showed 4 percent of the total amount of transfers going to states engaged in armed conflict, the same number reached 85 percent in 2015 and 51 percent in 2016 (CONCORD 2018, SPAS n.d.).

Despite efforts in 2018 to tighten legislation on sales to nations with 'doubtful democratic status' or potential involvement in conflict through a new bill introducing a democracy-criterion to grant arms sales' licences (KEX 2015, 4), such exports endure. In 2018 upon the death of Saudi Arabian dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Sweden was among the states refusing to halt its arms sales to the regime (EUROBSERVER 2018). In 2021, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen is nowhere near a solution as the Saudi-led coalition enters into its sixth year of aerial and ground warfare, systematically targeting civilian sites and persons. Among the list of nations receiving Swedish arms between 2018 and today, six states constitute warring parties in Yemen: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar (SPAS 2019; 2020a). Since the beginning of the war in 2015, Sweden has exported material to a total of 2,2 billion SEK to coalition partners. In 2019, the UAE was Sweden's third largest weapons client (SPAS 2020b).

Feminist Foreign Policy: The Activist State's Path Towards Utopia

If the above numbers paint a very different picture than that of astate self-designated as a global humanitarian superpower and peace arbiter, such Swedish identifications are fundamental to the rhetoric and strategy constituting the feminist foreign policy turn. Spearheaded by foreign minister Margot Wallström (Social Democratic Party, SAP), the Social Democratic and Green Party coalition government announced its all-pervasive feminist agenda. 'At this moment, a feminist foreign policy is forming, striving for preventing discrimination against women, ameliorating

women's conditions and contributing to peace and development', Wallström declared in 2015. 'The Swedish Foreign Service, in all its parts, shall strive to strengthen all women's and girls' Rights, Representation and Resources, based on the Reality in which they live' (Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) 2018, 11). The model recognises gender equality as an objective in its own right but furthermore as a necessary strategic tool for achieving the wider goals of peace, security and sustainable development (MFA 2018, 9). It is based on various international efforts to combat gender inequality such as the declarations and action plans emerging from the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing (MFA 2018, 16). Special importance, however, has been given to The United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 from 2000 and related Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agendas (see Kirby and Shepherd 2016, Willett 2010).

During Wallström's time in office, heavy emphasis was put on maintaining Sweden's long-standing role as a significant actor in global efforts to promote peace and prevent violent conflicts. This highlights the need to strengthen women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution along with gender equality as essential to post-conflict peace-building (MFA 2018, 19, 24). There is also emphasis on women's rights as human rights and the presenting of freedom from violence as 'a prerequisite for development' and overall peace (MFA 2018, 22). As part of their attempts to implement and spread the agendas set out through WPS and related resolutions, the Swedish government released a National Action Plan (NAP) 2016–2020 to enable the implementation of WPS domestically and internationally (NAP 2016). The plan sought to 'support women as actors for peace and security' and has in part established a global cooperative network on peacebuilding, prioritising certain conflict-ridden regions and states including Mali, Somalia, Afghanistan, Colombia and Syria (NAP 2016, 22-3).

There is an easily traceable biographical map pervading Wallström's feminist FP model, imbuing its policy formulations with a sense of necessity, urgency and purpose. It further connects Sweden to a larger 'experienced space' and horizons of both 'possibility' and 'expectation' (Berenskoetter 2014, 277-80) through sharing the referent objectof *women*. A heterogeneous but resembling past, present and future is fused together, connecting Sweden with the rest of the world and infusing its work with a larger meaning and rationale. In essence, the narrative reads as follows: in the past women have been subordinated under male hegemony, excluded from equal participation in rights, representation and resources, and subjected to multiple forms of gendered violence; active implementation of policy striving towards gender equality in the present will enable the sustainable development and sustainable peacebuilding which will facilitate the shared future visions of gender equality and world peace.

Building Castles in the Air

The Swedish government made the connection between 'the uncontrolled spread of weapons and violence against women' in their feminist FP Handbook from 2018 (MFA, 22). How then, does continued arms exports, seemingly impervious to harshening legislation, challenge Wallström's feminist FP biographical narrative – even as it lives on after Wallström's leaving office? Subotic (2016, 611) asks, 'if a policy change undermines the foundational state narrative, then wither the narrative?' In the case at hand, bringing together attention to the roles narratives play in enabling policy and the implications of horizontal and vertical contestation over how to best safeguard and fulfil the tasks presented through dominating Swedish national biography, the question rather reads: if contestation over policy choices undermines the narrative credibility of any one policy, then wither the narrative and perish the policy?

Arms vs. Feminism in the Struggle Over Sweden as Peace Mediator

Recognising neutrality as occupying 'an important role in the internal and external *identity* of the nation-state', Aguis (2006, 5) explores both the historical and current implications of Sweden's adoption of neutrality as a 'foundational state narrative'. As a policy-shaping template in Swedish politics, the notion of neutrality dates back to mid- to late 20th century Social Democratic heritages featuring the linking of neutrality in foreign affairs with an active internationalism and universalist solidarity (Aguis 2006, 6). The Swedish non-alignment and neutrality-politics developing during WWII, post-1945 and post-Cold War periods have been 'far from isolationist' and consistently marked by its basing in 'ideas of progressivism' (Aguis 2006, 6). Despite significant past and present questioning of the sincerity of Swedish neutrality it remains a central narrative frame among political practitioners and throughout public discourse. Accordingly, when navigating the dispute in question it appears at first glance as though

Wallström's feminist policy shift naturally follows on from and has taken hold of the hegemonic Swedish biographical templates of a neutrality characterised by progressivism and internationalism. Such frames resonate throughout Wallström's emphasis on strengthening the Swedish role as global peace arbiter and humanitarian superpower. Conversely, the narrative templates deployed to either critique and undermine or simply justify Swedish arms export alongside a feminist FP agenda, utilise the same tropes to demonstrate the need for Swedish military-industrial capacity to enable the role performances expected from such identities.

Upon being asked how exporting the radar and combat management system Erieye to Saudi Arabia amid active warfare in Yemen is compatible with their vision that it is 'a human right to feel safe', SAAB CEO Håkan Bushke's answer was twofold (SPAS 2017). Firstly, he referred to the arms industry as integral to maintaining Swedish neutrality: without a comprehensive domestic defence industry, the argument goes, Sweden would be forced to seek military equipment from abroad thus jeopardizing our international stance as a militarily 'neutral' state. Secondly, he emphasised that current exports have been democratically regulated since neither Swedish legislation nor ISP supervision has condemned the sales. 'The Swedish Peace and Arbitration Society (SPAS) believe in peace in their way. So do we', he stated, underpinning the Swedish domestic dispute over what constitutes effective security policy. This contestation over what role Sweden should play in aiding peace processes abroad and how to best deal with issues of national security at home, is illustrated in the paradoxical fact of Sweden's simultaneous exporting of arms to Saudi Arabia and the UAE despite Swedish participation as a key mediator in the Yemeni peace talks (Government Offices 2018, SPAS 2018). Through repeated references to the argument that it is not the government's role to scrutinise and designate legitimate arms sales – it being the sole responsibility of the ISP – the government, including Wallström, contend the issue to be out of their hands (Swedish Television 2018).

According to SPAS (2018), however, the government is in their full legal right to restrict specific arms sales deemed harmful. A position similarly declared in the state initiated investigation of Swedish arms exporting legal frameworks (KEX 2015, 436). Because of such contradictory government stances, it has become a commonplace throughout media reporting and public intellectual statements since 2014 to raise the question of whether Wallström's FP merely provides a 'feminism for export' (see e.g. Bergman 2018). 'Given today's arms export Wallström's feminism is but a PR-castle in the air' leftist newspaper ETC wrote in July 2018. The inability of the government to provide sufficiently binding legislation or assume its de facto responsibility as the ultimate decision-maker in arms export deals to halt and prohibit exports to non-democratic or warring nations, has caused an overwhelming majority of public opinion to label the Foreign Service work superficial and hypocritical.

If this thus underpins a key instance of *vertical* contestation, conservative *horizontal* critiques are more prone to invoke the neutrality template. Repeated statements from right-wing politicians demonstrate the competing political work enabled through rhetorical manipulation of hegemonic narratives (Lindberg 2018, Skovdahl 2019). Accusing Wallström of an escalating rhetoric and radical policy behaviour that damages Swedish diplomatic relations and essential political alliances – the primary example being when Wallström called the Saudi Arabian regime medieval (TT 2016) or when she challenged relations with Israel through recognising the Palestinian state (Radio Sweden 2016) – right-leaning critics seek to present Wallström as abandoning Swedish impartiality to the detriment of Swedish national security; discrediting Wallström's position as a credible and able representative of the Swedish position in world politics.

How, then, is this critique legitimised? The biographical map employed within the neutrality template by liberal to conservative proponents seeking to undermine Wallström's decision-making and naturalise current arms export industry, follows along a set of narrative constructs drawing on past, present and future experiences of both ontological and physical insecurity. The past is invoked as a time when Sweden built and inhabited the position of a noteworthy neutral state, small in size but with an impressively strong defence given the rapidly growing domestic weapons industry (Agrell 2000, Fägersten and Jerdén 2018, Radio Sweden 2012, Stenlås 2008).

Resulting from this self-reliance, Sweden successively supported independence movements, mediated in international conflicts and showed solidarity to the regions affected by US and USSR military campaigns (Aguis 2006, 6, Fägersten and Jerdén 2018, 344). Presently, however, Sweden is under threat. In an increasingly unstable world political climate – 'it is storming' (Hylén 2018) – Swedish defence capabilities have been severely weakened

and government representatives continue to damage Sweden's relations with NATO, thus harming Swedish national security. Key here, is the internal debate over whether Russia constitutes a 'real' physical threat or a mere narrative ploy by conservative forces to legitimate heftier investing in the Swedish defence. Strengthened arms manufacturing and exports are thus necessary to safeguard Swedish national security and enable the envisioning of a future where Sweden is strong, safe and *capable* in its role as a global peace arbiter. Notably, however, there are internal contradictions even within this faction as those invoking the neutrality template to legitimate the Swedish arms industry often concurrently advocate surrendering neutrality to join NATO.

Nevertheless, in an attempt at strategic manipulation of 'shared cognitive (narrative) frames for [particular] political ends' (Subotic 2016, 611) Wallström has personally dealt with the rising ontological anxiety derived from simultaneous vertical and horizontal (public, political, corporate) policy contestation; contention causing her discourse and practice to diverge and resulting in public exposure of her alleged narrative hypocrisy and policy failure. These efforts are illustrated in statements such as that she 'does not understand how [Swedish arms sales to countries like the Philippines] concern feminist foreign policy' and that 'you cannot assume that all women think it best to abolish arms export' (Reuterskiöld 2018). The same arguments have been adopted by Wallström's successor. Yet, the attempts to narratively realign the feminist agenda with continued arms exports (in order to escape accusations of hypocrisy), came under severe scrutiny once more. As Wallström left her Foreign Ministry position, she found herself entangled in a mess of contradictory declarations as to the relationship between FFP and arms production. Oscillating between not acknowledging the awkward fit between a feminist FP and Swedish arms trade on the one hand, and statements such as these, on the other: 'It is starkly evident that you cannot sell weapons to nations in war or war situations' (Swedish Television 2018) – despite Wallström's previous recognition of Sweden as doing just that. Adding to this, Wallström herself remained a staunch advocate of Swedish neutrality such that she has become regarded as a threat to Swedish NATO-relations and security policy (Hylén 2018). An advocacy amplifying the confusion regarding where she ultimately stood on Swedish arms transfers.

Conclusion

Proponents of continued arms exports (free from binding legislation or close-enough supervision of the democratic or conflict predicaments of recipient nations) ultimately succeeded in their quest to ensure that Wallström's feminist policies would never realise their professed intentions of making Sweden a state that puts concerns for human rights before political-economic gain. Of importance here, are these interest groups' ability to legitimate Swedish arms exports through mobilising the biographical narrative frames and international roles pertaining to neutrality: that is, a Sweden that by virtue of staying out of conflicts (apart from, maybe, selling them weapons) can partake fully in global peace mediation. In this way, the very same templates used by Wallström and other feminist foreign policy practitioners – enabling peace and development, preventing conflict and violence – are also invoked by those protecting military-industrial interests. Both factions thus share – at least rhetorically – a common horizon of possibility, but disagree on present predicaments and what lessons to be learned from the past. Both also strategically navigate between celebrating and criticising Swedish neutrality when it suits the policy-contestation in question.

The challenges posed by arms export to Swedish feminist foreign policy identity is consequently twofold: undermining the full realisation of its stated goals and roles in practice and causing internal anxiety as its practitioners are forced to reassess their own conceptions of what policies the feminist agenda can coexist with. The struggle over which policy direction best preserves and strengthens – indeed reinforces and provides ontological stability and meaning to – the Swedish identity as global peace enabler thus revolves around choosing between providing arms or preventing its spread. However, public debate – both during Wallström's time in office and under her current successor's – suggests that the Foreign Ministry's feminist narrative justifications and policy attempts will not be acknowledged as sincere and workable if it continues to fluctuate between the two. Nonetheless, what is ultimately at stake is whether a full realisation of the feminist FP identity – one that does not compromise with its fundamental intentions to globally undermine the violence from armed conflict – can overpower remaining military-industrial material interests and their hold over Swedish policymaking.

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