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**FROM PACIFISM TO
ARMAMENT: UNRAVELLING
THE PARADOX OF SWEDISH
ARMS TRADE**

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Introduction

'It is a human right to feel safe' (Saab, 2020). This is how Sweden's primary arms manufacturer, Saab AB (hereafter referred to as Saab), has recently articulated its vision and mission.

Most security branding studies have primarily concentrated on examining the methods employed by state and non-state entities to cultivate secure and safe perceptions of a location. However, there has been less investigation into how the established brand reputation of inherently safe, secure, and tranquil places is leveraged to promote security-related goods or services. This gap in research is particularly noticeable in the context of the Nordic region. Apart from Iceland, most Nordic nations boast significant security sectors.

While initially focused on serving their domestic markets, these industries have gradually expanded their operations over the last three decades. Consequently, certain Nordic nations have emerged as significant suppliers of security technologies and weapon systems internationally. Simultaneously, these countries are widely perceived and labelled as the 'do-gooders' in global affairs (de Bengy Puyvallée & Bjørkdahl, 2021). This perception is supported by many characterisations of the Nordics as 'agents of a world common good' (Bergman, 2007) and 'moral superpowers' (Dahl, 2006).

In this article, the focus is directed towards Sweden. Sweden presents an intriguing case study due to several notable factors: until its recent accession to NATO, it had boasted a lengthy tradition of military non-alignment and had been generally perceived as a 'neutral' nation. Additionally, Sweden has not engaged in armed conflict with another state since 1814, which is one of the longest periods of uninterrupted peace among all nations worldwide (Bjereld & Möller, 2016).

However, since the mid-1990s, Sweden has maintained a substantial arms industry in support of its 'total defence' model. Remarkably, despite its size, the country has produced weapon systems for all military branches – air, land, and sea – mainly due to substantial investments in military research and development (Stenlås, 2008). With the reprioritisation of Sweden's security policy and reductions in defence budgets during the 1990s and 2000s, major arms manufacturers like Saab were compelled to internationalise and focus on exports. This shift positioned the Swedish industry as a significant participant in today's global arms trade alongside some of the most influential states worldwide (Burja, 2022).

While academics have extensively examined Sweden's foreign and security policies, its defence industry has been neglected within branding literature. Therefore, this article seeks to fill this gap by bringing attention to current research on Nordic branding – specifically its practices and impacts – and shedding light on its link with security. The focus then shifts to analysing how actors within the defence industry, both public and private, utilise symbolic representations to shape a specific interpretation of 'progressive' national branding tropes for commercial objectives.

Nation branding in Sweden

In a broader context, nation branding encompasses managing a country's overall image, 'covering political, economic, and cultural dimensions' (Fan, 2010, p. 98). Drawing from the critical perspective within the nation branding literature (Kaneva, 2016; Varga, 2013), nation branding can be viewed as a socio-political tool utilised by influential governmental and non-governmental entities. This tool bolsters a competitive edge in transnational markets for various commodities and services while promoting the country's reputation.

National brands offer simplistic representations of national identities, as brands tend to prioritise stability over nuance. As Clegg and Kornberger (2010) suggest, brands are designed to provide a streamlined and simplified portrayal of national identities, thereby limiting the depth and complexity of these identities.

Existing literature on Nordic branding has centred around the utilisation, circulation, and admiration of the brands associated with Nordic states. This interconnected concept of the regional brand is built upon various factors, including but not limited to generous foreign aid policies, international solidarity, gender equality, humanitarian penal practices, peace advocacy and mediation, social welfare, and environmental consciousness (UIO, 2018). However, in recent times, an increasing body of research has delved into the paradoxes of Nordic exceptionalism, emerging alongside normative and moral conceptions of the Nordics. Recognised as one of the leading per-capita arms exporters in the post-Cold War period (Burja, 2022), Sweden holds a prominent standing in global political discussions (Andersson & Hilson, 2009). This reputation is largely due to its 'peace-promoting' and 'feminist' foreign and security policies (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2018; Sundström et al., 2021).

Scholars have highlighted the paradoxical nature of Sweden's foreign policy regarding arms trade. They have argued that while advocating for peaceful and ethical practices internationally Sweden promotes increased militarisation and adheres to the interest-driven preferences of the political economy of arms (Coetzee, 2021). Additionally, a considerable body of literature examines Sweden's concept of 'militarised neutrality' claiming it is used as a means to shape the identities of the state and its citizens (Agius, 2006; Jackson, 2019). Finally, scholars have studied the efforts of the Swedish defence establishment and arms industry to increasingly portray themselves as 'societal' or 'civil' security actors (Larsson, 2019). In essence, these arguments coalesce to suggest that Sweden's seemingly peaceful stance on the international stage is intertwined with a complex web of militarization strategies, identity construction through militarized neutrality, and the rebranding of defense entities as societal guardians, revealing a nuanced intersection of ideology, economics, and national identity.

Swedish nation branding tropes and the arms export

Since the mid-2010s, Swedish efforts to promote arms exports have been coordinated by a collaborative group known as Team Sweden. This coalition comprises representatives from the government, agencies, and private entities such as lobby groups and Saab representatives.

By utilising Team Sweden as their primary platform to organise export promotion endeavours, Swedish arms are now marketed in a more unified manner, explicitly leveraging the Swedish national brand (Larsson, 2020).

Representatives of Team Sweden openly acknowledge utilising their industry's technological superiority, breadth, and depth as a distinct selling point when advocating to foreign companies. In fact, they perceive Sweden as an 'international giant' in terms of innovation within the defence and security sector and, therefore, actively aim to link this progressive image with the Swedish brand name (Larsson, 2020). When questioned about Sweden's effectiveness in marketing arms, a security advisor from the US government in Washington DC who preferred to remain anonymous (cited in Coetzee, 2021) remarked, "Sweden has become very good at using its national and technological image to sell weapons, probably better than anyone else. Their success lies very much in the fact that buying nations usually assume they are the good guys" (Coetzee, 2021).

Sweden maintains a reputation for progressiveness, particularly as a significant humanitarian actor and provider of foreign aid. This perception remains robust despite evident tensions between its international development efforts and involvement in arms trade. The perceived separation between arms trade activities and their potential violent repercussions is a recurring theme in how the industry portrays itself. This narrative allows companies and lobbyists to capitalise on humanitarian ideals for marketing purposes, thus mirroring the Swedish government's 'dual' foreign policy approach crafted since the end of the Cold War. Indeed, Sweden has long aimed to reconcile its long-standing neutral stance with its aspirations to become a dependable ally for political and economic collaboration in an ever more interconnected world (Larsson, 2020).

As mentioned above, Saab's (2018) corporate vision asserts that "it is a human right to feel safe," a statement that has become deeply ingrained within the company in recent times. Aside from being somewhat false – as "feeling safe" is not explicitly listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights –, this message creates a paradoxical effect in discourse. Saab, Sweden's largest arms supplier by a considerable margin (SIPRI, 2022), endeavours to reframe its primary activity of arms supply as one aligned with human rights principles. In doing so, the company seeks to associate itself with broader humanitarian ideals in line with Sweden's brand, but completely in collision with its business activities.

Moreover, the portrayal of Sweden's defence industry as 'progressive', characterised by transparency and effective regulation, is evident in the way essential players leverage Sweden's 'strict' arms export legislation as a marketing tool, with the implication that purchasing weapons from Sweden ensures adherence to rigorous standards. For example, the lobbying organisation SOFF presents strict export regulations not as a hindrance to arms commerce but as a testament to the industry's integrity and a compelling reason for international governments to support and rely on Swedish arms manufacturers.

Another factor contributing to Sweden's reputation when it comes to stringent arms export regulation is the 2017 incorporation of the "democracy criterium" into the legal framework (Government of Sweden, 2015). This stipulation requires the Inspectorate of Strategic Products (ISP), the agency responsible for overseeing arms export permits, to consider the degree to which the purchasing country upholds democratic values when evaluating proposed transactions involving Swedish companies. However, the democracy criterion is not an absolute requirement that could halt arms transactions if unmet. Instead, the ISP views a country's democratic status as one element among many in its evaluation process. In essence, the democracy status serves as a conditional consideration, as it is consistently balanced against another pivotal factor outlined in the law: "broad security and defence policy interests" (Government of Sweden, 2015). This creates a perpetual gap in the legislation, allowing any export agreement to proceed as long as it enhances Swedish military capabilities and overall security.

Therefore, the level of 'strictness' in the Swedish arms exports appears somewhat negotiable. Despite this, the frequent public mention of the strictness of the Swedish arms export law by government representatives, defence sector officials, and members of the arms industry suggests that the perception of the legal framework itself plays a significant role in framing Sweden's image as progressive. For industry representatives, the "democracy criterium" is a powerful and successful branding tool, aligning with and purportedly upholding Sweden's self-image as a moral authority, humanitarian actor, and trustworthy business partner (Coetzee, 2021).

Specifically, the concept of "transparency" is evident in the utilisation of embassies as venues to conduct business discussions and in the diplomats' crucial involvement in facilitating arms trade opportunities. In fact, embassy personnel and representatives from Business Sweden have actively supported arms companies by informing them about forthcoming procurement opportunities and identifying local stakeholders. Additionally, embassies arrange business gatherings, such as pitch seminars, where selected Swedish firms engage with officials from the host country who oversee military acquisitions (Larsson, 2020), thus reinforcing the country's transparency and accountability status.

Conclusions

The case of Sweden presents a fascinating study of the intersection of national branding, arms trade, and foreign policy. Despite Sweden's long-standing reputation as a progressive and humanitarian actor, there is a complex tension between its involvement in the arms trade and its image as a promoter of peace and human rights. This tension is exemplified by Saab's efforts to align its arms sales with ensuring safety, thereby leveraging Sweden's brand for marketing purposes.

Furthermore, the Swedish defence industry's portrayal of itself as transparent and regulated, along with incorporating the "democracy criterium" into arms export legislation, serves as a branding strategy to bolster Sweden's image as a responsible arms exporter. However, the flexibility of this criterion raises questions about the true extent of Sweden's commitment to strict regulation in arms sales.

Despite these complexities, Sweden's defence industry adeptly navigates the global arms market, utilising platforms such as Team Sweden and diplomatic channels to promote its products. Ultimately, the case of Sweden underscores the intricate relationship between national branding, defence industry practices, and foreign policy objectives, highlighting the multifaceted nature of contemporary security dynamics in an interconnected world. Given the worsening security landscape in Europe, it would be interesting to see future research explore the impact of Sweden's recent NATO membership on the marketing and perception of its security products and services.

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