Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström

Statement of Government Policy

in the Parliamentary Debate on Foreign Affairs
Wednesday 15 February 2023

Government of Sweden

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Let me begin by expressing the Government's deepest condolences to everyone, including here in Sweden, who has lost loved ones in the catastrophic earthquake in Türkiye and Syria. This enormous loss of human life is a great tragedy.

The Government's message to Türkiye has been clear: we will do everything we can to help. Swedish rescue workers on the ground have been searching for survivors. Extra humanitarian funds for both Syria and Türkiye have been made available. Our Presidency of the Council of the European Union has, together with the European Commission, taken the initiative to organise a donor conference.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Sweden finds itself in a new era.

There is no other way to describe it.

The rumblings of a large-scale war in Europe can be heard once again, and we are undergoing the greatest reappraisal of our foreign policy since we became a member of the European Union.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrates boundless contempt for international law, the European security order and the most fundamental rules of the UN Charter.

We must have no delusions: it is not only Ukraine's freedom that is at stake, but also our own freedom here in Sweden.

Russia's aim is to supplant the European security order and return us to an era when might trumps right.

President Zelenskyy is absolutely correct in saying that his soldiers are fighting not only for Ukraine's survival, but also for our security and our values.

In light of this, Sweden is now setting a new course for its overall foreign, security and defence policy. The Government will primarily pursue a Swedish and European foreign policy – with Swedish interests and democratic values at its core.

It is with great humility and earnestness that I stand here today in the Riksdag as Minister for Foreign Affairs presenting this Government's first Statement of Foreign Policy.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Ukraine's cause is our cause.

The aggression greatly impacts stability in our neighbourhood. It affects Sweden and the entire global security environment.

For this reason, our support to Ukraine is extensive.

Not since the Finnish Winter War has Sweden provided a country in armed conflict with military equipment in the way that we are now supporting Ukraine.

Since Russia's large-scale invasion last February, Sweden's support to Ukraine has totalled more than SEK 14 billion.

Sweden has provided Ukraine with military support and advanced weapons. With humanitarian and economic assistance. With support for civil crisis management, reconstruction and reforms. Support for free media, cyber security and accountability. No future support can be ruled out.

Sweden will also be a strong partner to Ukraine as the country rebuilds. Already this year, Ukraine is expected to become the largest recipient of Swedish bilateral development assistance. Sweden stands by Ukraine, and will continue to do so for as long as necessary.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Overall, EU support to Ukraine totals more than EUR 50 billion. Together, the EU Member States have imposed the most forceful and far-reaching sanctions ever in order to help Ukraine win the war.

During the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU, our most important tasks include maintaining unity among the EU Member States, continuing to provide support to Ukraine and imposing further sanctions against Russia and Belarus.

Sweden and the EU are demanding accountability for crimes committed during Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Those responsible must be prosecuted and

punished. We support the establishment of a tribunal for the crime of aggression against Ukraine and welcome the announcement of an international centre for prosecution. Sweden is also working to ensure accountability through the International Criminal Court, the UN Human Rights Council and the OSCE.

Ukraine's path to EU membership has strong Swedish support. Despite the war, Ukraine is working ambitiously and at an impressive pace to implement necessary reforms. In the coming months and during the Swedish Presidency, Ukraine will receive feedback on those reforms, which are an important step on the path to future EU membership. Ukraine belongs in the EU.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Our future NATO membership means a new Swedish foreign and security policy identity. We will be an Ally and enter into collective defence commitments.

The Government intends to present the bill on Sweden's membership of NATO to the Riksdag in March.

The strong support for Sweden's NATO application in both the Riksdag and public opinion is a strength for our country. We also have very strong support within NATO, as is manifested by security guarantees from a large number of NATO countries.

We have come a long way in the process; thus far, 28 of 30 member countries have ratified Sweden's accession. Only Türkiye and Hungary remain. Sweden has delivered results in all areas of the trilateral memorandum with Türkiye and Finland, and we continue to work on its implementation. The Government will continue to strive for broad parliamentary support for the new security policy stance, not least through the Defence Commission.

By joining NATO, we will strengthen our security policy influence and our contribution to security and stability in the entire Euro-Atlantic area. As a NATO member, Sweden will fulfil its commitments under the North Atlantic Treaty and to all other Allies.

Sweden will be an Ally to rely on.

We have unique expertise to contribute. One example is Swedish technology, which will be a valuable asset to allied countries' development of military capabilities. Sweden and France are the only two EU countries that have the capability to launch satellites. We are a leading space nation and will remain at the forefront in this field.

Sweden is clearly committed to the fight against terrorism. And will continue to be as a NATO member.

Like Norway and Denmark in their time, Sweden is joining NATO without reservations. However, like the other Nordic countries, we do not foresee having nuclear weapons on our own territory in peacetime.

Sweden remains committed to arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation. As part of this, we will continue to actively participate in the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament. Moreover, the norm against the use of chemical and biological weapons must be upheld.

The conditions for Sweden's strategic work on security issues are also strengthened through the National Security Council established by the Government.

Sweden will be stronger with NATO, and NATO will be stronger with Sweden.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

It is no secret that this Government will have a clear focus on Sweden's neighbourhood in light of the new security environment.

This begins with our closest partner – Finland. We are geographically, historically and culturally intertwined with Finland. And our relationship will be deepened further through Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership.

The Nordic family forms one of the world's oldest and most closely knit regional cooperation structures. As a whole, the Nordic region would qualify not only for the G20, but also for the G10. We are leading when it comes to free enterprise, innovation and competitiveness.

The Government will also prepare ambitious presidencies next year for the Nordic Council of Ministers, and the 'N5' – consisting of the Nordic countries

– and the 'NB8', which also includes Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This offers us good prospects for strengthening our Nordic-Baltic ties.

Sweden will continue the work towards realising the vision of the Nordic region being the world's most sustainable and integrated region by 2030.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Sweden will remain a proactive and constructive partner in the EU. We will dare to lead the way, form coalitions with like-minded partners and clearly stand up for the values we believe in and that benefit Sweden and Europe. This Government will harness the major opportunities offered by our EU membership and look beyond the Presidency.

As threats grow, we Europeans need to pull together. It is therefore important that Sweden has close relations with all Member States. When the 27 EU Member States stand united, we have a greater impact and can make a difference.

In addition to strengthening Ukraine's and Europe's security, our priorities during the Presidency include enhancing EU competitiveness and pushing for an ambitious European climate policy. We will safeguard liberal democracy and the rule of law.

If we lift our gaze, we can see how the European states have been brought closer together, and we are more united now than in a long time. And we should welcome others into our community.

EU enlargement is an important tool for strengthening ties with our neighbourhood and contributing to peace, stability and prosperity.

Enlargement will not come without strings attached. Reforms on fundamental rights and democracy are necessary, as are forceful measures against corruption and organised crime.

As one of the initiators of the Eastern Partnership, Sweden has a strong voice. The Partnership should be developed further and become more flexible with a format tailored to each individual country within it.

The EU should have forward-looking and deeper relations with the United Kingdom, including in the area of foreign and security policy.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Sweden pursues, and will continue to pursue, an ambitious free trade agenda. Trade has built the Swedish economy and contributed to a strong brand internationally. In a free and open market, innovative and competitive businesses contribute both to growth and welfare and to the green and digital transitions.

New emerging technologies and products such as artificial intelligence, quantum computers and biotechnology will improve people's lives.

At the same time, there are some major risks. Control over new technologies has geopolitical dimensions and national and global security significance. Sweden can play a central role here as a strong research nation and as a world-class high-tech nation.

One important element is the EU-US Trade and Technology Council, of which Sweden is hosting a meeting as part of the Presidency of the Council of the EU. The Trade and Technology Council is an important forum for cooperation, seeking to develop transatlantic standards on technology and to address competition between major powers.

Sweden will be a future driving force on cyber issues.

To further raise our level of ambition, the Government will present a strategy for cyber and digital issues in foreign and security policy. It will be used to ensure that our cyber and digital policy is aligned with our security and defence interests and promotes our foreign policy values.

The Government will appoint a special envoy for international cyber issues.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

With a war in Europe, our neighbourhood is inevitably our top foreign policy priority. But our foreign policy will always have an important global dimension.

Since the Second World War, the United States has played an indispensable role in European security. Canada is also an important partner to Sweden and Europe. We Europeans must do more to strengthen the EU as a security actor, but we will still need a strong transatlantic link.

China is the world's second-largest economy and a technology leader; at the same time, the country remains under authoritarian rule and has growing global ambitions. This is something we have to consider. We welcome dialogue and cooperation where they are possible and in line with our interests and values, for example to promote trade on fair terms and to tackle climate change. In parallel with this, we continue, along with the rest of the EU, to draw attention to human rights violations.

Sweden's interests in relation to China are best served by a common European approach and transatlantic coordination.

This also applies with regard to Taiwan, where we want to continue our cooperation within the framework of the 'One China' policy. China's new tone towards Taiwan is worrying.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

We need to undertake a thorough analysis of which strategic partners Sweden has at present, and which partners it should have in the future.

Many Indo-Pacific and Latin American countries have long been important foreign and trade policy partners. There is huge potential for co-development, not least via the opportunities for Swedish businesses to scale up their activities, and in terms of the green transition.

The Government hopes that the free trade agreement between the EU and New Zealand can be signed in the first half of this year, and the negotiations with Australia can be completed by the end of the year.

The Swedish Presidency of the Council of the EU coincides with Japan's G7 Presidency and India's G20 Presidency, giving additional momentum to our bilateral relations.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Sweden has built its prosperity on trade. Trade is an important component of relationship-building, and a route out of poverty. When poverty is reduced and communities can focus on something other than their most acute needs, the threshold for conflict and the pressure for democratisation are raised. This is why we are linking aid policy and trade policy.

Aid will be used to a greater extent as a lever to strengthen countries' democracy and participation in the international economy. This requires a re-calibration of aid policy as a whole. The Government is raising its level of ambition to make aid more focused, relevant, effective and transparent. Objectives will be set in terms of quality and results.

In addition to support to Ukraine, priority will be given to poverty reduction and health initiatives for the most vulnerable, humanitarian support, democracy and human rights, enhanced climate action and initiatives for the rights and opportunities of women and girls. Core support will be redirected from multilateral organisations to civil society.

The African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement has huge potential and lays the foundations for economic development by creating the largest free trade area in the world.

Sweden will remain engaged in the Middle East, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and the African Great Lakes region. The same goes for Western Asia, and South and South-East Asia.

With regard to Israel and Palestine, Sweden will act for a two-state solution based on international law.

I would also like to take this opportunity to convey my own and the entire Government's gratitude to everyone who has served on Sweden's behalf in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali, MINUSMA. Although events on the ground have not followed the course we would have wished, we Swedes can be proud of our contribution.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Excluding women from education, from work, or in some other way denying them the right to participate in society, as is happening now in Afghanistan, for example, is a violation of their human rights. This Government will pursue strategic gender equality efforts in development cooperation policy and foreign policy.

Sweden supports a number of gender equality and SRHR initiatives – including in conflict areas where women are subjected to sexual violence, exploitation in prostitution and human trafficking. We have supported the establishment of

centres in Ukraine and neighbouring countries that offer women free medical, legal and psychosocial support under one roof.

The equal value of every individual, regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation or religion is a matter of freedom. A number of religious minority groups around the world, including Christians and Uyghurs, are subjected to oppression.

The EU will exert strong political pressure on Iran to cease its violent repression – for the Iranian people's human rights, their right to protest and their right not to be arbitrarily detained or brutally executed. Their right to life, and right to live in freedom.

Iran's nuclear technology activities, its destabilising role in the region and its military cooperation with Russia also give cause for concern.

The Swedish Government is acting bilaterally, as well as within the EU and the UN. Within the EU, we are continuously reviewing what measures should be taken that are legally feasible and will be most effective. And further sanctions can be expected.

The UN is facing major challenges, and differences of opinion between countries make it difficult for the international community to take forceful action. Sweden will act within the UN through alliance-building, a long-term approach and determination. The Government will continue to press for effective solutions that meet the need for global climate action, humanitarian efforts and sustainable development, and that safeguard peace, security, and rights and freedoms.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Gas has become a powerful geopolitical weapon, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine has accelerated the transition to fossil-free energy. The green transition is necessary and offers new opportunities for employment and growth. We need to make full use of the synergies between climate financing, trade and innovation. The Government will therefore cooperate closely with the business sector to promote exports and foreign trade, investments and Swedish competitiveness.

The link between climate policy issues in the broad sense and security policy is becoming increasingly important. The Government intends to expand climate

aid and make it more effective. This aid needs to encompass support for climate change adaptation and resilience and support for emissions reductions.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Our consular mandate and efforts to assist Swedes in distress are constantly ongoing. Those concerned might be individuals caught up in natural disasters or major accidents, or who fall victim to crime or are detained for some reason.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the evacuation operation in Afghanistan clearly showed how important it is that we are prepared and can act quickly when necessary.

The Government will continue to work unilaterally and together with others for the release of Dawit Isaak and Gui Minhai. Efforts in other complex cases involving detained Swedes are also ongoing.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

It is often said that democratic development is like a pendulum. With war in our neighbourhood and authoritarian forces starting to see their chance, the pendulum is currently swinging away.

But we will do all that we can to hasten the resurgence of democracy and freedom.

The Swedish people have demonstrated admirable solidarity. Many have contributed by collecting and donating for Ukraine. We have also strengthened our own preparedness for crisis situations.

Sweden is also the EU Member State in which the largest proportion of the population – a massive 97 per cent – backs the EU's support for Ukraine. This figure clearly demonstrates how we Swedes support fundamental democratic principles.

Peace and democracy cannot be taken for granted. They must be reinforced by every generation, by every state, and they must be constantly defended.

I can declare that there are many people who want to join in this defence of freedom.