Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde

Statement of Government Policy

in the Parliamentary Debate on Foreign Affairs
Wednesday 24 February 2021

Government of Sweden

Statement of Foreign Policy 2021

Mr Speaker,

I want to begin this year's Statement of Foreign Policy by saying something that is obvious to us all.

Politics matters.

This year marks 100 years since women were first able to exercise their right to vote in a parliamentary election. This was the milestone that made Sweden a democracy. Democracy is something we take for granted, but it is still denied to the majority of the world's population.

The Government is working for an international order based on international law, with rules and agreements rather than 'might is right'. With our clear security policy line, solidarity-based aid, climate and environment investments, feminist foreign policy and strong trade policy, we not only safeguard our own country, but also contribute to peace, security and development, and democracy globally.

Mr Speaker,

The COVID-19 pandemic has claimed more than two million lives worldwide.

Sweden has pushed for global equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. Through the EU, we are part of the COVAX global vaccine cooperation initiative. The EU has mobilised EUR 853 million for COVAX, making it the largest donor. Sweden has contributed SEK 200 million and is participating in the efforts to strengthen COVAX's access to vaccine supplies.

To secure vaccine supplies for the European Economic Area countries, Sweden has undertaken to sell vaccines on to Norway, Iceland and Switzerland.

Mr Speaker,

As Chair of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in 2021, Sweden is standing up for the European security order based on international law and the UN Charter. We want to highlight the relationship that the OSCE identifies between respect for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and security within and between states.

The unresolved conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine, Georgia and Transnistria are examples of the consequences of disregarding the European security order. These challenges also affect Sweden.

Mr Speaker,

The EU is Sweden's most important foreign and security policy arena. In an uncertain world, the EU must be a strong voice for peace, democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

A well-functioning EU is a prerequisite for Sweden's welfare. The majority of our trade is with other EU Member States, and at EU level we can strengthen the green transition and safeguard jobs.

The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement lays the foundations for an important future partnership. The Government intends to deepen Sweden's and the EU's relations with the UK, including in the area of foreign and security policy.

Nordic cooperation is important, but is facing severe trials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cooperation with the Baltic States is also of great importance to our region and our common security. The Government has presented a new strategy for the Arctic region.

The countries of the Western Balkans are an important part of the EU's neighbourhood.

Turkey plays a key role for the EU. We will support the democratic forces in Turkey and be clear in our criticism of human rights violations in the country and Turkey's actions in its neighbourhood.

The UN remains a cornerstone of Swedish foreign policy, and we remain an influential voice in the UN.

In the follow-up to the declaration commemorating the 75th anniversary of the UN – which was adopted following negotiations led by Sweden and Qatar – we showed that it is possible to agree on an ambitious way forward to strengthen the UN.

The value of the UN's actions to alleviate suffering and prevent hunger cannot be overestimated. As one of the world's largest donors, Sweden supports the UN's work in a number of humanitarian crises. Last year's Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the World Food Programme – proof that the UN's work makes a difference.

Mr Speaker,

Sweden's foreign and security policy builds on cohesion in the EU and cooperation on a broad front: in the Nordic and Baltic Sea regions, in the UN and the OSCE, and with NATO. A strong transatlantic link is important for the security of Europe and the United States.

Sweden will not remain passive if another EU Member State or a Nordic country suffers a disaster or an attack. We expect these countries to act in the same way if Sweden is affected. We must therefore be able to both give and receive support, civilian as well as military.

Sweden's security policy remains firmly in place. Our non-participation in military alliances serves us well and contributes to stability and security in northern Europe. It requires an active, broad and responsible foreign and security policy combined with enhanced defence cooperation – particularly with Finland – and credible national defence capabilities. We will contribute to long-term stability and security in our part of Europe.

The security situation in Sweden's neighbourhood and in Europe has deteriorated over time. In response to this trend, a historic investment in total defence is under way, and we are continuing to reinforce our international defence and security policy cooperation.

Through our participation in civilian and military operations in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali and Ukraine, Sweden is contributing to security, preventing conflicts and creating the conditions for sustainable development. This engagement is an important part of our solidarity-based security policy and contributes to common security.

Mr Speaker,

It is currently more important than it has been for some time to pursue a feminist foreign policy to promote women's and girls' rights. Several countries have now followed Sweden's example.

The Government has given additional support totalling more than SEK 260 million globally to counteract the effects of the pandemic on activities linked to sexual and reproductive health and rights, for example.

Sweden has taken on a leading role in the global Action Coalition on Economic Justice and Rights. Sweden will work for women's and girls' economic empowerment, including through the introduction of social and economic reforms and gender equality in the labour market.

The women, peace and security agenda is an important priority of Sweden's term as Chair of the OSCE.

Mr Speaker,

The ongoing pandemic affects our consular work. In the spring of 2020, the consular efforts of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs helped bring around 9 000 stranded Swedes home on 400 transports.

The Swedish Foreign Service works constantly and intensively on the most difficult consular cases. We always have the best interests of the individual in mind, and we will never give up our efforts.

Mr Speaker,

The United States has elected a new president, and his statements on cooperation with allies and partners are important for us in Sweden and the EU.

There are many areas in which we can renew and deepen our cooperation, including security policy and multilateralism, trade, the green transition and new technologies, democracy, and gender equality, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The Government plans to adopt new strategies for development cooperation in Latin America in the first half of 2021.

The Government is monitoring the consequences of the demonstrations in Chile and the work to draw up a new constitution.

Sweden is working, through both the EU and the UN, to support a negotiated political solution in Venezuela.

Mr Speaker,

The Government supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and every country's right to choose its security policy path. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its illegal annexation of Crimea are unacceptable. These violations of international law undermine the European security order and are grounds for continued sanctions against Russia.

Where we have common interests we can and should cooperate with Russia. One example of this is the Council of the Baltic Sea States, in which cooperation with Russia works well. At the same time, we are concerned at the negative trends in terms of human rights and civil society space in Russia, and we condemn violations of international law and poisonings.

The fraudulent election and the brutal abuses committed by the regime in Belarus are unacceptable. Along with the other EU Member States, we have introduced targeted sanctions against those responsible.

The challenges that have marked the EU's eastern neighbourhood over the last year make EU engagement in the region through the Eastern Partnership more important than it has been for some time.

Mr Speaker,

A year ago, I visited Yemen. It was clear how much Sweden's engagement is appreciated. Sweden continues to provide comprehensive humanitarian aid to Yemen's long-suffering population and support to the UN-led peace process.

The conflict in Syria remains one of the world's most serious crises. The only way to achieve peace in Syria is through a political solution.

The Government values relations with both Israel and Palestine. Sweden is working with the EU for the resumption of meaningful negotiations between Israel and Palestine and a resolution based on international law in which two states can coexist in peace and security.

Preserving the nuclear deal with Iran is essential to non-proliferation and the security situation in the Middle East. Iran must resume full compliance and the United States must rejoin. We also underscore the serious human rights situation in Iran.

Sweden has a comprehensive and longstanding commitment to peace, democracy and development in Africa. In Ethiopia, the conflict in Tigray threatens to undermine the country's democratic development, with far-reaching regional consequences. In Sudan, the political transition continues under a civilian-led transitional government after 30 years of authoritarian rule.

The security situation in the Sahel is cause for great concern. In August, a military coup took place in Mali. A transitional government is now in place and general elections are due to be held in 2022. Sweden contributes to security and development in the Sahel.

Mr Speaker,

Asia's growing importance means opportunities for trade and investment, green technology and innovation. The Government is developing its cooperation with countries such as India, Japan and South Korea. Sweden also has a role to play in conflict resolution and disarmament on the Korean Peninsula. The coup in Myanmar is unacceptable and the Government condemns it.

China's international significance affects Sweden and Swedish interests to a growing extent. Sweden and the EU see global challenges that we can only address together with China – such as climate change, health and a functioning and fair free trade order. While cooperation is important, we will take action against security-threatening activity directed at Sweden and Swedish companies. We engage in a frank and open dialogue with China in which human rights and freedom of expression are key aspects.

The Government is particularly concerned about the shrinking democratic space in Hong Kong. Hong Kong residents' human rights must be respected.

Sweden must increase its knowledge of China. The national knowledge centre on China began its activities in January this year.

The Government looks positively on increased trade cooperation with China and welcomes the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment.

Mr Speaker,

It is concerning that democracy is being challenged in many parts of the world. Growing authoritarian forces are often linked to economic and social disparities.

Through the Drive for Democracy initiative, 600 activities have reached 1.7 million people. We have held 70 Democracy Talks, providing a platform for civil society, trade union members, LGBTIQ people and women's rights activists. Swedish democracy assistance has increased in recent years.

The internet has opened up new possibilities to participate in democracy, but it has also lowered thresholds for those seeking to curtail democracy and freedom of expression. For this reason, the Government will initiate a dialogue with platform providers to discuss how they can work with civil society to combat threats and hate, strengthen democracy and protect human rights on the internet.

Antisemitism on social media is one of several important themes that will be covered at the Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism.

To address the shrinking space for trade union organisations, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs intends to implement continuing professional development initiatives in this area. The Swedish Global Deal initiative promotes good labour market relations.

Organised crime is a major challenge for our society. The violence expressed in shootings and explosions is only one aspect of organised crime. This type of crime often has clear international connections.

Work is now under way to determine how our missions abroad can assist law enforcement authorities. Five embassies have been specially tasked with developing the capacity of the Swedish Foreign Service.

Mr Speaker,

The threat of nuclear weapons is a critical issue. The Stockholm Initiative is one of the leading political initiatives for nuclear disarmament.

The decision of the United States and Russia to extend the New START disarmament treaty is especially welcome. The world cannot afford another nuclear arms race.

Just over a month ago, the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons entered into force. I have written to the UN to reaffirm Sweden's intention to participate as an observer.

Sweden's disarmament policy should continue to be informed by a strong knowledge base in the future. For this reason, a national knowledge centre for research on nuclear disarmament is now being established at Uppsala University at the Government's initiative.

A future scenario of lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS) that do not comply with international law must be avoided. With the objective of an effective international ban, Sweden is actively participating in the important work within the framework of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons.

Sweden will take the lead in implementing the 2030 Agenda. It is our roadmap towards a stronger, more resilient and sustainable world. The Government is continuing its efforts to promote international corporate social responsibility.

Sweden's development assistance is effective and world-class, and the Government remains committed to the target of one per cent of GNI.

Mr Speaker,

The climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, and depletion and pollution of the world's oceans are global and cross-border issues that affect us all. They threaten to irreversibly alter the conditions for humankind, exacerbate famine and increase the number of conflicts and pandemics around the world.

Next year, Sweden will host the global high-level meeting Stockholm+50.

We will continue to lead the way through our own transition to a fossil-free society and via our climate diplomacy.

The Government has tasked the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) with enhancing efforts to promote the sustainable use of biodiversity.

Mr Speaker,

The Government is strengthening the promotion of strategic investment in Sweden to improve our competitiveness. Sweden should work for a stronger link between the Paris Agreement and trade. Sweden's trade policy should contribute to achieving the goals of the Paris Agreement, and to sustainable development and the green transition. The Government wants to see more ambitious sustainability chapters in EU free trade agreements.

With their worldwide presence, Swedish companies have not only great opportunities, but also a responsibility to strengthen respect for human rights. We will highlight ways in which international regulatory frameworks for export credits should contribute to achieving the global sustainable development goals and the Paris Agreement.

A key factor in responding to the pandemic has been to secure access to staff, equipment and medicines. For this reason, a well-functioning single market with freedom of movement and free trade is critical.

Mr Speaker,

I began this year's Statement of Foreign Policy by looking to the past, so let me conclude by looking to the future. We face a decade of possibilities.

Technological advances are apparent in the green transition and in vaccines being developed at record speed. Social progress has resulted in a global increase in prosperity in which millions of people have been lifted out of poverty. What must now follow is political transformation, because without politics and without democracy and freedom for people, technological advances and social progress are to no avail.

Let me therefore conclude with a passage from American poet Amanda Gorman's reading at Joe Biden's presidential inauguration in the United States.

> "But while democracy can be periodically delayed, it can never be permanently defeated. In this truth, in this faith, we trust, for while we have our eyes on the future, history has its eyes on us."