

LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Nuclear weapons in Sweden – the pro-arguments

In the early 1950s, nuclear weapons were generally considered just more powerful "conventional" weapons without special political meaning. Sweden, as a modern and developed country with serious defence forces, should acquire atomic weapons in due time. It was also argued that Swedish soldiers should not have to fight with weapons inferior to those of an enemy. It was considered obvious that the ability of the Swedish armed forces to impede an invader would be much improved if equipped with nuclear weapons. Sweden's defence planners at the time took it for granted that if an invader had nuclear weapons, they would also use them if militarily convenient.

The policy of neutrality excluded sharing nuclear weapons with other nations or buying nuclear weapons from abroad. Domestic manufacture of both nuclear explosive material and nuclear explosive devices would be the way to go. The Swedish atomic bomb would have to be built from plutonium produced in domestically-built nuclear reactors, as domestic production of weapon grade uranium would be out of question for economic reasons using the enrichment methods known at the time.¹

Nuclear weapons in Sweden – the against-arguments

The question of acquiring nuclear weapons by Sweden was controversial from a domestic standpoint. The official political debate in the Parliament as well as the debate in the media and amongst the general public was very lively. Several political parties were split over the issue. The Social Democratic Party, forming the government at the time, was severely split over the atomic weapons issue. Among the politicians against nuclear weapons from the very beginning was the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Östen Undén.

By May 1956, the Swedish Social Democratic Women's Association had already unanimously adopted a resolution against nuclear weapons. At the same time, public understanding about nuclear weapons issues increased. People became aware of the destructive power of nuclear weapons and the consequences of a nuclear war in Europe. It became increasingly clear the potential use of nuclear weapons on Swedish territory would be a national disaster. In 1957, 95 000 signatures were collected against a Swedish atomic bomb.

The Action Group against Swedish Nuclear Weapons (Aktionsgrupp mot svenska atomvapen, AMSA), was established in 1958. AMSA united people with different political views but a common opposition against a Swedish atomic bomb. The atmosphere in Sweden also changed due to

¹ Prawitz, Jan. Svenska kärnvapenpolitik under 50 år, Utrikespolitiska Institutet, November 2004

international negotiations which were pro disarmament and anti-proliferation. Sweden was elected a member of the Geneva based Conference on Disarmament in fall 1961. The issue topping the agenda of the CD was complete disarmament of all nuclear weapons, an issue taken seriously by many politicians, including government representatives. Thus, drastic military budget reductions were proposed, and acquiring new highly technological weapons seemed less appropriate.

A new military strategic analysis

In the early 1960s, the new military doctrine of "flexible response" was widely discussed in Europe. This doctrine was finally adopted by NATO in 1967 and later also by the Warsaw Pact. One feature of the new doctrine was that use of nuclear weapons in war could be authorised only by the political leader of the possessor State. It also implied that the nuclear weapon powers signalled a great hesitation to ever escalate a conflict to nuclear levels, and that the threshold for escalation to nuclear war was elevated in order to make possible efforts to terminate a conflict before nuclear weapons would be considered. Conventional forces were allotted increased importance, while nuclear weapons became primarily "political weapons", although usable if necessary. This change influenced the defence environment even for neutral Sweden.

It was concluded that if a military conflict were to take place in Europe or a military attack be directed at Sweden, it would most probably be an attack with conventional means. It was considered most unlikely that an aggressor would escalate the conflict to a nuclear war, and that Sweden should rather upgrade its conventional forces. The conclusion was the Swedish nuclear forces, anyway, would never match that of the large nuclear powers. In August 1968, Sweden signed the NPT as a non-nuclear Weapon State.

The future

The ten years of a consideration of a nuclear weapons option in Sweden were followed by a long period of strong Swedish commitment to disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation. This position prevails, and since the Swedish signing of the NPT and a change of Sweden's non-nuclear weapon state status has never been discussed since.

In 1995, Sweden became a Member State of the European Union. Through the EU Common Security and Defense Policy, non-nuclear member states inevitably become involved in the nuclear issue. Within the EU are nuclear weapon states France and the UK. If Sweden were to join NATO, an option seemingly attractive to many politicians, the problem would grow even bigger. The US – the largest and most influential of NATO Member States – deploys 350 nuclear weapons in several NATO states in Europe.

Sweden in international nuclear weapons debates

Internationally, Sweden is a strong proponent for nuclear disarmament and nuclear weapon limitations. Throughout the years, Sweden has advocated a nuclear test ban, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, the establishment of nuclear weapon free zones, de-alerting of nuclear arsenals and also a ban on nuclear weapons. Sweden has permanent missions both in New York and Geneva with staff dedicated solely to the issue of disarmament. As a member of the EU, Sweden is heard less as an independent actor, as the EU states often make common statements in different disarmament fora.