



Swedish Coastal Defence Over Four Centuries: War as a Changing Institution of International Society

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

This is an article on Swedish coastal defence over four centuries. It seeks to understand the changes in Swedish naval policy over time by exploring how the understanding of the nature of war visible in defence planning varies over time, due to both changing norms and changes in harder factors, such as geography, resources and adversaries' capabilities. Its primary aim is to account for the development of Sweden's naval capacities from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. For this, the article draws on sea power concepts. Its secondary aim is to explore the development of war as an institution of international society by studying only one – albeit historically very central – aspect of one state's warring capacity over time, namely its navy.

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As a great power of the mid-17th century, Sweden was a signatory of the treaties of Münster and Osnabrück, ending the Thirty Years' War in the Peace of Westphalia. During the first half of the 20th century, Sweden was neutral; in the second, it was a heavily armed non-aligned "humanitarian superpower." In the early 21st century, Sweden suddenly abandoned its policy of non-alignment to creep under NATO's so-called nuclear umbrella.

According to realist theories, small states are likely to either balance or bandwagon when confronted with great power conflicts (Waltz, 1979, pp. 125–127). "Secondary states," as Waltz puts it, "flock to the weaker side; for it is the stronger side that threatens them" (Waltz, 1979, p. 127). He also points out that theory of international politics is concerned with the great powers of any era (Waltz, 1979, pp. 72–73). Given that Sweden has taken several positions throughout the history of the European states system, the evolution of Swedish military might and ambition is a tricky case. As one among the northern European great powers of the 17th and 18th centuries, Sweden was conspicuously belligerent. Its relative decline and its choice to pursue a policy of withdrawal from great power conflicts during the 19th century seem anomalous; its active balancing between the Soviet Union and the West during much the 20th century, meanwhile, directly contradicts realist theory. Today, it seems to have opted for bandwaggoning, allying to the stronger side.

Drawing on English School theory, this article begins from the assertion that such an unpredictable historical development is better understood by seeing war as an evolving institution of international society.

English School theorists think of states as forming an international society. Within this society, states follow certain rules and cooperate to uphold certain common institutions (Bull, 1977, p. 13). War is traditionally seen as one of several institutions of international society (Pejcinovic, 2013). Recent research has suggested that such institutions are far from constant over time but, rather, continuously evolve and change as a result of how they are practiced and discursively legitimized (Buzan, 2004; Friedner Parrat, 2017; Knudsen, 2019a; Navari, 2020). This means that they are contingent and malleable rather than unpredictable. Tradition, rituals, formal rules, and the education of those who perform the practices all contribute to making institutions resilient, in the sense of privileging partial continuity over drastic transformation. In this way, institutions remain recognizable over centuries. In the case of war, this slow evolution manifests both in the different principles and legitimations guiding war and in its practices. If war is an institution of international society, it has arguably been conceived and practiced in various ways at various times.

This article thus uses English School theory to study the evolution of Swedish coastal defence over four centuries. Its aim is to explore the development of Sweden's naval capacities from the mid-17th century onwards, and specifically its capacity for coastal defence as manifested in the building and defence of its major naval port in Karlskrona. This topic is interesting for several reasons. Sweden has been around long enough to evince much change and variation in its preparedness for war; it has long played a role (if not always a very prominent one) in the European society of states; and it offers a conveniently paradigmatic model of naval matters on account of both the nation's geographical position and its reliance on naval warfare in its more belligerent days. This study has as secondary aim to illustrate the development of war as an institution of international society by studying a single – albeit historically very central – aspect of one state's warring capacity over time: its navy. The inquiry is guided by concepts taken from sea power theory.

Methodologically, both primary and secondary sources about Swedish coastal defence and larger naval capacities are employed to construct a birds-eye view narrative of the evolution of Swedish coastal defence over time. This method is inspired by, rather than strictly adhering to, interpretivist process-tracing (Guzzini, 2012; Norman, 2015), in which "researchers seek to account for an outcome of intrinsic or theoretical interest by looking not just at the immediate circumstances that triggered the outcome ... but at the longer-term process that over time gave rise to that outcome" (Norman, 2015, p. 4). Sea power concepts are used to periodize Swedish naval policy over the studied centuries. In sum, this approach arguably makes for an empirical contribution of intrinsic value, as there are few scholarly analyses of Swedish naval policy in cross-historical perspective. Most sources used are written in Swedish by military officers, serving in the Swedish navy during the time they describe.

Academic sources on Sweden's navy are notoriously hard to come by, especially in a cross-historical perspective. While Killham gives a *longue durée* account of Nordic history and the emergence of a regional military balance which includes Sweden (Killham, 1993, pp. 9–24), he does not enter

into much detail on naval matters. Granholm (2014) discusses Sweden's Cold War and post-Cold War naval stance but only hints at Swedish naval policies in earlier centuries; and Bergström and Friedner Parrat (2022) use Sweden as an example of a small coastal navy in their study of the different present-time perspectives on littoral warfare between great power navies and small navies. Wedin (2004) analyses debates concerning the Swedish navy before World War One, in relation to the predominant principles of defence of the era, and the organizational structure of the navy – and, especially interestingly, the historical distinctions between the Swedish navy's purpose of protecting its own archipelagos and attempting to dominate the larger Baltic sea. As pointed out also by Björnehed (2022), navies often face a larger need to defend and communicate their *raison d'être* compared to armies and air forces. There are also several available accounts, mainly in Swedish, of what happened in naval matters in various stretches of Swedish history (for instance, Holmström, 1929, pp. 68–103; Öberg and Biörklund, 1919). While these are very interesting for a modern reader for their historical detail, they frequently lack analytical ambition.

THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS: WAR AS AN INSTITUTION OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Rather than thinking about institutions in terms of negotiated agreements or formalized organizations, Bull, among others in the so-called English School of international relations, considered institutions as fundamental and rule-bound practices that states cooperate to maintain. In that framework, the very presence of such institutions signals the existence of international society, a minimalist cooperative framework upheld by states to regulate their coexistence and cooperation (Bull, 1977, p. 13). Other institutions discussed by Bull include the balance of power, management by the great powers, diplomacy, and international law. For modern scholarship, the list extends to include other institutions which arguably also hold ordering functions in international society (Knudsen, 2021; Schouenborg, 2011).

Although these institutions have at times been held to be constants, current research demonstrates a growing awareness of their malleability (Friedner Parrat, 2020, pp. 761, 765–767; Knudsen and Navari, 2019; Spandler, 2015). These institutions consist of reproductive practices that are tied to discursive legitimation themselves consisting of norms, beliefs, and expectations (Friedner Parrat, 2017, p. 629). As pointed out by Knudsen, this means that they may change either as a result of changes in practice or as a result of changes in the norms, beliefs and expectations that legitimize the practices (Knudsen, 2019b, pp. 38–40). Obviously, this also applies to war, which has arguably been legitimized in very different ways in different times.

Interestingly, for Bull, war is both an institution of international society and thus a pillar of order in that society, and a sign that order is breaking down. The rule-bound nature of war makes it an institution. Or, rather, institutionalizing war is a way to tame it. Holsti argues that there is an ongoing de-institutionalization of war (Holsti, 2004, p. 301), by which he means that the practices of war no longer conform to the norms, beliefs and expectations serving to make them an institution of international society. If war was to be de-institutionalized entirely, it would become chaotic and system-threatening. De-institutionalization does not imply that the practice constituting the institution ceases, only that it is disconnected from its accompanying discursive legitimation (Friedner Parrat, 2017, p. 629, 2020, p. 766). It follows that international society de-institutionalizes war when the norms, beliefs, and expectations surrounding it start to break down. War, understood as the practice of organized violence, however, might continue.

Holsti also sketches the possibility that war might currently be under “re-institutionalization” as an institution of international society. Possibly, “modern technology can help to make the actual conduct of war more consistent with the laws of war. It can ameliorate the situation of organized hypocrisy, where the laws of war develop further and pile up on each other, only to be ignored and systematically violated by combatants” (Holsti, 2004, p. 297). In this case, there should be new legitimizing principles for war – notably a shift back from the 19th century focus on *jus in bello* (war conducted according to just and fair principles) to the earlier notion of *jus ad bellum* (war waged for the right reasons). This has arguably happened with respect to R2P (the Responsibility to Protect), and *jus ad bellum* arguments have been used more or less credibly at several occasions, perhaps most famously as the British defence for NATO's intervention in Kosovo 1998 (Greenwood, 2000). Practices that are still recognizable as war become associated with a new, or partly new, discursive legitimation: that is, a new set of norms, beliefs, and expectations.

Another possible tendency of war over the last century is that it is becoming obsolete in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) region (Holsti, 2004, pp. 297–299). The expectation of democratic peace – the understanding that these states will not wage war against each other – means that the institution has changed. The change depends both on practice (war is no longer reproduced in the same way among the rich democracies in the OECD region as it historically was) and on the discursive legitimation that accompanies it (war is illegitimate, except against “bad guys”). The effect is that war is taken to be illegitimate because many of those in the “centre”¹ of international society no longer see it as a legitimate option. This means that the legal positivist idea of war as just a regular occurrence between sovereign states, one among many tools in their toolbox (or “the continuation of politics by other means,” as suggested by Clausewitz) has been watered down (Neff, 2005, III; IV). Those who do make war should thus no longer declare it proudly but, rather, execute it covertly – or alternatively, make sure to act on a United Nations mandate in an international coalition. This tendency can be discussed in relation to recent conflicts such as those conducted in Syria, Libya, Georgia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo. Even the Russian war in Ukraine can be understood in these terms; Russia may be disqualified from belonging to the rich democracies, but it does not admit itself to be waging a war of aggression.

In sum, there is a strong case, theoretically speaking, for assuming that war as an institution of international society has evolved over the last few centuries. Using these ideas of war, the next section will look more directly at how coastal defence works and attempt to follow its development in the Swedish case through the centuries to see what it can help us to understand about the preparation for, and sometimes actual execution of, war.

THE PURPOSES OF MAINTAINING A NAVY

To move from this rather general discussion of the evolution of war as an institution of international society into the details of Swedish coastal defence, a discussion of what a navy is for is required. To begin, however, the choice of studying the evolution of war through naval arrangements such as coastal defence rather than overall military capacity merits some justification.

In the course of the centuries covered in the historical narrative, a nation’s navy was of outmost importance for both defensive and offensive purposes. For a country of Sweden’s geographical location, with a long coast and few land borders, the navy arguably continued to be the first line of defence and attack even as inland infrastructure such as railways and roads were developed. It was only with the emergence of the air force in the early 20th century that the navy started to share its central place. Yet, even with the advent of aviation, Sweden remains dependent on seaborne shipping for its trade and food supply; there continue to be grounds, then, for contributing to international cooperation for maritime security today.

Accepting that Sweden’s geography required naval means for defence, it is worth starting from Booth’s (1977, pp. 16–25) suggestion that navies have three overarching roles: a military role, a diplomatic role, and a constabulary role. As will be clear from the historical record, the Swedish navy has been used for all three purposes over the last centuries. Bull (1976) also discussed the different purposes of maintaining sea power. He distinguished between Mahan’s ideas of the sea as a highway and as a way to practice “aggression”; more recent use of the sea for (protection against) strategic weapon systems; and the sea as a repository of resources. The two purposes inspired by Mahan required the capacity to dominate the sea, or in recent times at least to achieve a more temporary sea control, by a great power navy. The two later purposes are accessible for all coastal states. This justifies a distinction between different types of navy: blue-water, green-water, and brown-water. These differ according to each state’s needs: “The norm is to associate power-projection navies with blue water, coastal and territorial defence navies with either green or brown water, and constabulary navies with green water” (Lindberg and Todd, 2002, p. 196). With its empirical focus on defence of the shore rather than any inland waterways, brown-water navies will not be discussed further in this article.

¹ The English School has historically, and quite unapologetically, been a very West-centric theory. Moreover, it addresses management by the great powers as an institution of international society. While I will not problematize this perspective in the present article, see Buzan, 2014; Dunne and Reus-Smit, 2017; Gong, 1984; Keal, 2003; Keene, 2002; Yao, 2019.

Blue-water navies are meant to achieve and exercise what Mahan describes as “command of the sea” in times of war (Mahan, 1890). Presently, the more modest term is to “exercise sea control.” Till (2018, pp. 190–192) emphasizes how sea control should be understood as a temporary and spatially limited means to the end of allowing one’s own naval and maritime movements while limiting those of one’s opponent. Yet, in current times, aiming for sea control anywhere other than close to one’s own borders is very expensive and requires enormous capacities; naval air protections and overseas bases in which to resupply resources when the fleet is far from home, for example (Bergström and Friedner Parrat, 2022, pp. 3–5). In older times, it required major investments in ship technology and trade routes. Blue-water navies are thus sustainable only by great powers, those that nourish the ambition to act in many theatres across the globe, and have a global, or extended regional, influence.

Green-water navies belong to what may be called “coastal states,” that is, “small or medium size state[s] situated by the sea, but without the ability or the will to maintain a blue-water navy with the capacity to establish sea control outside of its own local waters” (Børresen, 1994, p. 148). Instead, they may, in case of war, aim to achieve sea denial, which can be defined as “the condition short of full sea control that exists when an opponent is prevented from using an area of sea for his purposes” (Till, 2018, p. 193). While sea denial may be an important complement to sea control, it can also be its alternative: “For some countries, the ability to prevent an enemy from using the sea to do them harm is all that is required” (Till, 2018, p. 193). This requires different weaponry and strategies compared to the blue-water navy (Bergström and Friedner Parrat, 2022).

As it happens, “the purpose of the armed forces of a small state is not to wage war, but to avert it” (Børresen, 1994, p. 151). While a small state may need offensive capacity, its aim is not to win a war against a superior aggressor but, rather, to make the aggressor pay as dearly as possible. For Børresen:

The armed forces of the small state contribute to averting war first by maintaining the sovereignty of the state and by enforcing national jurisdiction in peacetime, in an efficient and credible manner. Second, the armed forces are an instrument of the state in crisis management, not least for their deterrent effect on the opposition. Deterrence works when the costs of armed aggression, in the mind of a potential aggressor, seem larger than the benefits of going to war, so that in the end he decides to keep the peace. (Børresen, 1994, pp. 151–152)

For a small state, that is, “not losing” might amount to victory.

One way of achieving this is to maintain a “fleet-in-being.” Contrary to the Mahanian ideal of creating a superior navy and seeking out the enemy for a decisive battle, fleet-in-being is shorthand for several strategies favouring the inferior side. These strategies of preservation may range from “moderated offensive” to “passive defence” (Till, 2018, p. 218f). Where going into battle with a superior enemy would mean that the fleet is destroyed, simply preserving it can restrict the adversary’s liberty to act.²

The distinction between a great power navy and the navy of a coastal state is central to the present inquiry, as indicative of both the development of Swedish naval capacity throughout the centuries studied and of the evolution of war as an institution of international society. While some conceptions of war, notably the legal-positivist ideal discussed above, have required relatively capable military establishments even of small to mid-sized powers, others require primarily defensive capacities. Planning for conquest is different from planning for territorial defence, which is in turn different from planning for peace in one’s own region and possible armed ventures taking place elsewhere on a UN mandate.

Interestingly, Bull, writing during the Cold War, suggested that the future potential for sea control by great power navies was likely to be severely circumscribed: they would in various ways hinder each other from achieving sea command while weaker coastal states would manage to assert themselves in their own home waters. “The coastal states, moreover, will in many cases have the military power to withstand threats directed at them, at least when these threats are made in their own home waters and by naval means alone” (Bull, 1976, p. 8). This

² For a more nuanced idea of “fleet in being,” especially regarding the need for mobility for any inferior fleet to have an influence on an enemy, see Castex, 1994, pp. 338–348.

indicates that both technological and legal developments, now primarily the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1994, have, over time, made it less worthwhile to maintain a blue-water than a green-water navy. Till indicates that “many commentators think that ... a major shift in the balance between the capacity to control the sea on the one hand and to deny it on the other is taking place” (Till, 2018, p. 193).

ON COASTAL DEFENCE: SWEDISH NAVY FROM BLUE TO GREEN

The Swedish experience of coastal defence and naval warfare demonstrates several kinds of naval ambition at various historical stages. Concepts of naval capabilities and coastal defence contribute a useful periodization of the evolution of war as an institution of international society in the Swedish case. The literature on coastal defence, like the wider literature on naval warfare, tends to take primarily the British or American perspective (and to some lesser extent French or Russian/Soviet).³ While these perspectives are doubtlessly relevant and interesting, there is much to suggest that the experiences of states with great power ambitions and blue-water navies might differ quite sharply from those of smaller states with green-water navies, intent primarily on protecting their own coasts and territorial waters (Bergström and Friedner Parrat, 2022; Børresen, 1994; McCabe et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2014; Vego, 2015). Sweden’s naval ambitions have arguably been blue-water during the 17th and early 18th centuries, fitting to its great-power posture at the time, and green-water, from the late 18th century to the present, with a sharp emphasis on the ability to defend the coast serving to deter possible enemies.

THE STRUGGLE FOR SEA CONTROL (17TH CENTURY)

In the turbulent early years of the European international society, Sweden made peace with Denmark at Roskilde 1658, thereby conquering the southern territories of Skåne, Blekinge, Halland and Bohuslän, areas on what are today the country’s south and west coasts. Although other territories and claims have shifted between Denmark and Sweden since, these borders have remained stable following the Roskilde peace. For the development of Swedish naval capacity, this new access to the southern Baltic coast was an important asset. It also meant that Denmark no longer alone controlled the entry-points to the Baltic Sea (a “choke-point” in modern terminology; see Vego, 2015, p. 36).

The Scandinavian climate of the period brought severe winters. In the course of successive wars with Denmark, Sweden drew the lesson that it needed a naval base that might stay ice-free over winter. With a navy based in Stockholm and faced with difficulties leaving its frozen waters in winter, in 1679 the Swedish monarch Karl XI decided that a new naval port should be built in Blekinge, on Sweden’s south-eastern tip (Söderlindh and Fahlander, 2002, pp. 42–43). It was to be named Karlskrona – “Karl’s crown.”

Given the lack of land-based communication routes at this time, the sea route was often the most convenient way to get around Sweden and to reach Finland, then a Swedish territory, and the country’s possessions along the Baltic shores in territories today Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Russian, Polish and German. The building of Karlskrona thereby helped the Swedish navy acquire the capacity to establish a considerable degree of sea control within the Baltic Sea in times of war. The Mahanian image of the sea as a highway for blue-water navies seems a fitting illustration of the Swedish use of its 17th century navy. Within today’s frames of reference, the Baltic Sea is too small for any navy to qualify as blue-water, but there is no doubt that Sweden, as one of the signatories to the peace treaties of Westphalia, was a regional great power at the infancy of the modern European international society. Its navy was adapted to those ambitions.

During this period, war was perceived as an ever-present possibility; the possibility manifested itself several times. Indeed, the occurrence of war seemed certain enough to warrant the long, arduous, and expensive project of constructing the new naval port.

3 The two Anglo-American classics in the field being Julian Stafford Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Greenwich: Conway Maritime Press, 1911) and Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Little, Brown and Co, 1890). For a French classic, see Castex, 1994, or better still, the more complete French edition from the 1930s.

KEEPING OTHERS AWAY: A GREAT POWER IN DECLINE (18TH CENTURY)

In addition to the ambition to be able to quickly establish sea control in the event of war, another central concern in building the naval port was to keep others out – from the naval base and from the coast more generally. Plans had already been made for achieving this as the building of Karlskrona had begun, but it became increasingly urgent as Sweden lost much of its territory around the Baltic Sea, along with its status as a great power, in the course of the 18th century. Successive threats from Denmark, Russia, and England made an outer line of defence indispensable; this took the form of ambitious fortifications and underwater walls in the straits leading towards the city, protecting the entry points to Karlskrona (Söderlindh and Fahlander, 2002, pp. 44–45). In a similar manner, fortresses and obstacles in the straits, the building of which had started in the early 16th century, protected the entry points to Stockholm.

Sweden ceded its great power status and dominance of the Baltic region to Russia during the 18th century. In the Great Northern War of 1700–1721, Sweden lost its possessions in what is today Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Russia and Germany. The territorial loss was completed in 1809 when Finland fell to Russia. Obviously, these territorial and geopolitical rearrangements changed the needs for naval defences substantially; for instance, the great fortress of Vaxholm on an island outside of Stockholm, hitherto centrally placed in the waters between Sweden and Finland, now became an outer defence on Sweden's eastern border.

For Karlskrona, the emphasis on keeping foreign navies out meant placing ever more priority on the building of great fortresses on either side of the main strait leading into the city, Drottningkärs kastell on the west side and Kungsholms fort on the east side. During several wars fought with Denmark and Russia in the 18th century, these fortresses played a major deterrent role even as they were under construction. They later deterred the British fleet, led by Nelson, in its attempt to force Sweden out of neutrality in 1801. In the smaller straits leading into the city, underwater walls were built to reduce the speed and choice of ingress to the city; smaller fortresses were built on the surrounding isles. This was completed with an inner defence line running through the city, aimed at protecting the naval port (Söderlindh and Fahlander, 2002, pp. 43–46).

This period saw a considerable decline in Swedish military capacities, not only in terms of territorial possessions and offensive ambitions, but in terms of how to conceive of the possibility of war. From a situation where the Swedish navy could put up a credible attempt to control the Baltic Sea in times of war, it retreated to a primarily defensive position where the main onus was placed on holding on to the mainland and averting attacks. Interestingly, this applied not only against the neighbouring Baltic contenders, Denmark and Russia, but also to the “real” great power navy of the day – the British fleet marking its overall sea dominance even in the Baltic. During this period, the conception of war progressively shifted from something in which Sweden would take an active part to something in which others would oblige Sweden to participate.

DEFENSIVE SEA DENIAL (19TH CENTURY)

Sea denial means denying sea control to others during a war. This might of course happen anywhere at sea where another navy is attempting to gain war-time sea control, but in line with Till's observation above, small states are likely to strive for sea denial primarily by protecting their own coast. During most of the 19th century, Sweden, having lost its great power status, focused on protecting its borders against foreign attacks rather than waging war. The Swedish king, French-born general Karl XIV Johan, formulated a system of “strict and independent neutrality” in 1834 (quoted and discussed in Killham, 1993, p. 18). This period also coincided with the beginning of an extended period of peace for Sweden; Sweden's most recent war, fought in 1814 with Denmark over Norway, ended with Sweden and Norway forming a union lasting almost a century before its peaceful dissolution in 1905. For Karlskrona, this period meant that the outer and inner lines of defence were reinforced while other parts, notably Drottningkärs kastell, were allowed gradually to become obsolescent and, eventually, to fall out of use entirely (Söderlindh and Fahlander, 2002).

There was a Baltic Sea front during the Crimean War (1853–1856). Russia demanded that Sweden, a neutral nation, close its harbours to French and British ships; it only complied for its naval harbours, keeping its civilian ports open, effectively allowing the French and British to use the natural harbour at Fårösund on the island of Gotland as a base for their attacks on Russia's Baltic flank. Russia and the newly unified Germany subsequently announced to Sweden that it

must arm and defend Fårö, or else Swedish neutrality would not be respected. Fårö has been armed on and off ever since, and Gotland's rearmament is subject of political debate even today (Wedin, 2017). During the Crimean War, the Karlskrona-based part of the Swedish navy played an active part in the protection of Sweden's neutrality by escorting foreign ships along the coast and hindering belligerent action in its territorial waters (Söderlindh and Fahlander, 2002, pp. 330–334).

Another defining moment for the Swedish ambition of denying the sea to an enemy in case of war came in 1872. Since newly developed rifled cannons using projectiles were deemed more powerful than older ones using round cannonballs, it was decided to let the Swedish cannon boat Hildur fire at the Vaxholm fortress from 200 meters distance to test the resilience of the fortress. The third projectile aimed at the same spot broke through the two-meters-thick granite wall of the fortress (Söderlindh and Fahlander, 2002, pp. 20–21). For Karlskrona, this discovery meant that its remaining great fortress at Kungsholmen also ran a similar risk of succumbing to an attack by modern cannon boats. A thorough reconstruction and updating of Kungsholmen followed.

During this period, there grew an acceptance that the Swedish navy could not, and should not, aim to dominate outside of its own territorial waters. The emphasis was clearly on Sweden avoiding being dragged into conflicts between other rivaling powers rather than building any aggressive capacity. This coincided with what is sometimes called the peaceful "long 18th century" of 1815–1914, when no system-wide wars scarred the European international society. There were wars in Europe, among them the Crimean War and the Franco-German War of 1871, but they were not as devastating to the continent as a whole and its international relations as those of earlier, and later, centuries. Instead, Europe's great powers exported their mutual tensions in the scramble for colonies, notably in Africa and East Asia (Bain, 2003). Sweden, whose overseas possessions were negligible, profited from this period of prolonged peace and stability by focusing on other aspects of its societal evolution, actively contributing to peace and stability by prioritizing its own defence. In addition, the peaceful dissolution of the union with Norway in 1905 arguably contributed to the sentiment that initiating war was no longer a realistic option for Swedish policy. That the dissolution of the union would be peaceful was far from evident, and it might be taken as a struggle not only for Norwegian independence, but also as a struggle within the Swedish elite over how to handle issues with potential military implications (Vedung, 1971).

In 1902, a reorganization of Swedish military forces created a new entity entirely dedicated to coastal defence: the coastal artillery (Persson and Stålhandske, 1977, p. 8). It comprised up to six coastal fortress complexes, of which the Karlskrona system was one, and remained in place for a century. Organizationally, the coastal artillery consisted of mobile and stationary artillery and naval minelaying entities; over time it developed amphibious capacities (Persson and Stålhandske, 1977, pp. 75–77). The very creation of the coastal artillery and its maintenance over time obviously speak to the technical innovations of the time; they also indicate a renewed political emphasis on protecting the Swedish coast and making intrusion as difficult as possible for potential enemies. In case of war, sea denial would have been the central concern of the Swedish navy. Military preparation in this period had become a matter of deterrence and pacification rather than expansive warfare. The navy had now definitely scaled its ambition down from blue-water to green-water level. During this period, the Swedish conception of war as something that others do was slowly cemented.

WARTIME NEUTRALITY AND THE COLD WAR (20TH CENTURY)

During and after the two World Wars, Karlskrona remained heavily armed. Its defence was continually updated, albeit in a somewhat piecemeal fashion. A parliamentary decision to reinforce the coastal artillery was notably made shortly before the outbreak of the First World War (Persson and Stålhandske, 1977, p. 24). Wedin argues that the war-time Swedish naval strategy was one of "fleet-in-being" (Wedin, 2018, p. 52): that is, avoiding battle but exercising an influence by being a potential nuisance to superior adversaries (Till, 2018, pp. 218–222). Its mission was twofold: to guard Sweden's neutrality and to oversee the smooth running of maritime communications while maintaining defences in order to be able to deny access to an aggressor if need be (Wedin, 2018, p. 52). Both parts proved taxing. Neutrality was difficult to preserve, both at the outset of the war, when many officers wanted to join the war on Germany's side to counter the Russian threat, and towards the end, when the Finnish civil war threatened the Åland islands and their Swedish-speaking population. Protecting the lines of communication was also difficult, especially as Kattegatt and Öresund, the entry points to

the Baltic Sea, were blocked by mines. Food shortages ensued in Sweden, accompanied by riots and revolutionary scares. Eventually, negotiations with Britain afforded food shipments to Sweden (Wedin, 2018, pp. 51–53).

The interwar era, in Sweden as elsewhere, saw a resolve not to have more wars, and the preference for peaceful solutions to international disputes which Sweden seems to have developed during the 19th century manifested again in the negotiated settlement over the Åland islands. The islands, situated in the Baltic Sea roughly between Stockholm and Helsinki, had been de-militarized since the end of the Crimean war in 1856, but re-armed by the Soviet Union at the end of the First World War, and troubled during the Finnish civil war (Wedin, 2018, pp. 54–55). The islands were strategically interesting for both Finland and Sweden, as well as the Soviet Union. The League of Nations-brokered settlement in 1921 ruled that Åland should belong to Finland, albeit with an important degree of self-rule to guarantee its Swedish language and customs, and that it should remain demilitarized (Rotkirch, 1986).

The same anti-war sentiment led to reduced military spending, deprioritizing parts of the Swedish coastal defence in the parliamentary decision of 1925. This settlement reduced the number of coastal fortress complexes, although the Karlskrona complex remained in service and had been reinforced with aerial defence (Persson and Stålhandske, 1977, pp. 34, 39). The 1930s, however, saw reinforcements of the coastal artillery, and its emphasis moved from defending entry points to naval bases and principal sea routes to securing an outer line of defence in the archipelagos, covering larger segments of the coast and meeting a potential aggressor further out at sea (Persson and Stålhandske, 1977, p. 48).

The parliamentary decision of 1936 reinforced the Swedish armed forces once more. Yet, at the outbreak of the Second World War, the coastal defences were still largely under construction. War vessels too, were lacking, and for asserting the neutrality of Swedish territorial waters, “everything that floats” was mobilized at the beginning of the war (Lagvall, 1967, p. 20). Civilian ships sailing in Swedish waters were sometimes claimed by belligerents (Soviet or German), and the presence of Swedish warships was necessary to enforce respect for the Sweden’s territorial waters and sea border (Lagvall, 1967, p. 22). Submarines, primarily Soviet but also German, caused considerable trouble for the Swedish neutrality guards. The planned relocation of the Coastal artillery from the naval bases to the outer archipelagos was implemented during the war (Persson and Stålhandske, 1977, pp. 52–59).

During the early Cold War era, in contrast, Sweden largely kept its acquired military capacity, and Karlskrona remained one of its naval centres. According to one observer, in the 1950s Sweden would even have been able to claim sea control in the Baltic in the event of a (conventional) war, while also keeping the passages westwards open under neutrality (Haglund, 2014, p. 124). Sweden also experienced an economic boom during this time, which allowed it to simultaneously maintain a high level of military preparedness and to develop a large portion of its own military hardware (Granholm, 2014, p. 175). During the two World Wars, the coastal artillery units had to make do with vessels mostly older than the organizational entity itself, whereas now, it was equipped with materiel specifically designed to meet its needs, including anti-ship missiles (Persson and Stålhandske, 1977, pp. 65–70). In some accounts, the Swedish naval modernization relying primarily on Swedish industry to furnish equipment specifically adapted to coast and archipelago has contributed to Sweden’s development as an “extreme littoral” state, with materiel and competencies specifically adapted to the defence of a long coast while entertaining no, or very limited, aggressive ambitions (Lundquist, 2014). Other sources, however, insist that both armament and training of the Swedish navy, especially after the 1960s, suffered heavily from a lack of coherent strategic planning, counter-intuitive reorganizations of its management structure, and successive budget cuts (Haglund, 2014).

It is worth mentioning here the intensified submarine threats of the 1980s and early 1990s. Their highpoint was “Whiskey on the rocks”, when the Whiskey-class Soviet submarine S-363 (U-137 according to the contemporary Swedish classification system), carrying nuclear torpedoes, was stranded in the archipelago of Karlskrona, within the military protection area (Haglund, 2014, pp. 109–110). Granholm (2016, p. 172) calls this “one of the most serious crises during the Cold War directly involving Sweden.” Apart from forcing Sweden to enhance its submarine search capacity (Granholm, 2014, p. 173), this incident also led to the development of better surveillance techniques: the submarine had been aground on the rocks for close to 24 hours before being finally

discovered by a local fishing boat. Moreover, the submarine threats led to interesting dilemmas concerning international law and operative rules surrounding war-like measures in peacetime. It proved quite difficult to chase foreign submarines within the Swedish archipelagos while also observing international rules for peace-time engagement (Söderlindh and Fahlander, 2002, pp. 223–227). So long as no war was declared, the means available to protect the archipelago were found somewhat limited – a fact that speaks to the substantial grey-area that opens up if the central distinctions between war and peace are not consistently upheld.

Since the end of the Cold War, the Swedish navy has put increasing emphasis on operations abroad within the context of multinational peacekeeping missions and cooperative anti-piracy ventures (Granholm, 2014, pp. 176–177). This came with a significant reform of its military, going from a large conscription organization to a much smaller professional military, in “an effort to emphasize quality and high-tech above quantity” (Granholm, 2014, p. 174). Flynn (2020, p. 56) claims that in 2017 Sweden’s navy employed 60% of the numbers employed by Denmark’s navy, and that the corresponding numbers were 36% when compared to Finland, and only 28% when compared to Norway. At present, however, the pendulum of Swedish defence planning seems to be swinging back to focusing more on traditional territorial protection, notably to efforts at displaying its presence in the Baltic Sea (Wedin, 2017). Thus, Swedish-Finnish defence cooperation has been approved by the Swedish parliament; an ever-closer relationship to NATO is evident, including the 2022 application for full membership; conscription, dormant for almost a decade, has been re-introduced; and broad parliamentary negotiations aimed at achieving a long-term multi-party consensus on defence planning are under way. As for coastal defence, the Chief of the Navy identified it as one of the navy’s three primary tasks going forward (Nykqvist, 2018). Its new Visby class corvettes, “formidable craft in the unique topographical conditions for which they are designed” (Till, 2020, p. 22), being multipurpose platforms capable of surveillance, minelaying, and fighting, and possessing a considerable stealth capacity, illustrate that this purpose is taken seriously.

Since the 20th century, the Swedish navy has been used in both its military and diplomatic and its constabulary capacity. It is decidedly green-water in character – even, as Lundquist (2014) has it, “extreme littoral” in character. Although its capacity has ranged from rather unprepared at the outset of World War I to well-trained and equipped during the first part of the Cold War, it has not made any attempt to go further than protecting its own territory (save a mission to Åland in 1918, at the request of the Swedish-speaking islanders). In line with Børresen’s suggestions about “coastal states,” the overall goal of its coastal defence seems to have been to deter potential aggressors by making attacks on Sweden seem too demanding to be worth the while. Clearly, in World War II, Sweden’s neighbours were less fortunate in that venture, and Sweden’s good luck in this respect presumably became an influential factor in the assessments of options available to it after the war.

In the 21st century, Sweden continued a process, launched during the Cold War, of making contributions to the international order by participating in UN-mandated missions abroad. At the turn of the century, however, unlike during the Cold War, this happened at the expense of the territorial defense. Resources were invested in professionalization, making the armed forces “slimmer but sharper,”⁴ thus signalling a political belief in “the end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992), or in Holsti’s assertion that war was facing obsolescence in the OECD area. Today, the tide is arguably again turning; the Baltic theatre is once more seen as a place which might some day require competent defence provided by the Swedish navy (Granholm, 2020; Wedin, 2017). The period is characterized overall by the optimistic belief that war had been outgrown, with the world wars understood to be rather unwelcome surprises which caught Sweden unprepared at their outbreak. During the Cold War, in contrast, war was again perceived as a clear possibility, and extensive efforts were put into efforts to deter militarily much stronger powers.

FROM BLUE-WATER AMBITIONS TO ARMED DETERRENCE

Changes in Sweden’s relative position in international society and its shifting attitude towards war signify that Sweden has not followed a straight historical trajectory from its great power days to its current strategy of cautious commitment. Sweden set its navy up for attempting

⁴ This was term used widely in the transition from territorial defence to professionalized armed forces to be deployed abroad. See for instance Swedenmark, 2016.

sea control during the wars of its great power era and went through a lengthy period of decline, during which it focused on denying others wartime sea control along its coasts and on defending its territorial heartlands. It arrived at a position of being heavily specialized in keeping the peace by deterring any potential aggressors. While its post-Cold War emphasis on contributing to the upholding of the international order through participation in multilateral operations abroad might be added to this, when looking back at the present with the sort of *longue durée* perspective that has been applied to earlier centuries, the focus on overseas missions may come to resemble a short parenthesis.

Sweden's weaponry and naval equipment have been specifically developed to function in proximity to its own coast, in close cooperation with its air force and army. Given the overall purpose of deterrence, the Swedish Navy has been comparatively heavily armed; rather than blue-water capacities, the focus has been on multipurpose platforms for littoral combat, surveillance, minelaying, and for moving quickly, freely, and discretely around its own archipelagos. While none of this would, of course, protect much from nuclear attacks, Sweden opted to abstain from acquiring nuclear capacity in the mid-1960s, joining the non-proliferation treaty in 1968 (Granholm, 2014, p. 171, note 15). Cold War planning thus primarily concerned the scenario of a conventional invasion and incursions into Swedish territorial waters.

The very understanding of the Baltic Sea as a geographical and geo-political environment has also shifted during the period reviewed. In the 17th century, the Swedish fleet had a considerable naval capacity and could arguably be classified as a blue-water navy, even though it hardly left the Baltic Sea. Sailing vessels and contemporary technology made great sea battles a reality in the Baltic, even if a modern ship could cross such distances in a few hours. With modern technology, any fleet conceived all-but exclusively for the Baltic Sea will not be a blue-water navy, but, rather, a green-water navy by definition.

CONCLUSIONS

This study of Swedish coastal defence is informed by the evolution of war as an institution of international society. Although definite answers are hard to come by, changes in war as an institution are arguably co-constitutive of the decline of Swedish sea power over the centuries studied. The historical development of Swedish naval capacity and coastal defence arrangements reflects a more general evolution in the institution of war. Of this general evolution, the Swedish naval retreat from blue-water ambition to green-water deterrent is arguably a constituent, albeit by no means pivotal, part. Swedish policy has been influenced by factors outside of its control – but it has also reciprocally influenced the evolution of its own context.

Swedish naval history seems to follow the trend of war as currently delegitimized in the OECD area; since the early 19th century, Sweden has made preparations for the possibility of attack from another, belligerent, state rather than for the initiation of hostilities of its own. The character of war has altered since the 17th and 18th centuries. Then, states, Sweden included, fought for conquest and resources. In the 19th century, war became a mere legal-positivist fact sometimes occurring between sovereign nations. This is exemplified by Sweden's shift from being at war repeatedly in the 17th and 18th centuries, its principal foes being Denmark and Russia, to its indirect involvement as a neutral in the Crimean War. Over the 20th and 21st centuries, war evolved again, this time to something seen as decidedly undesirable; now the Swedish defence focused even more clearly on defensive strategies such as sea denial and keeping a fleet-in-being.

Sweden's 20th century focus on deterrence seems to demonstrate the assumption that the possible occurrence of war is regrettable and should be avoided almost at all costs. Sweden's defensive capacities can thereby be understood as an insurance policy rather than a tool to be employed offensively. Its present boarding of the bandwagon of the stronger side (NATO) further reinforces the reading of war as illegitimate; the West, notwithstanding its overwhelming strength, is not seen as a threat. Russia is.

Swedish coastal defence shows additional tendencies, however. The idea of war becoming de-institutionalized, with rules for its conduct no longer observed, are manifest in events unfolding in unexpected ways, notably during both World Wars, when Swedish policy seemed at times to have consisted of a series of improvisations, and during the submarine incidents of the Cold War. Territorial aggressions doubtless took place, although their extent is yet to

be ascertained. No declarations of war, and no subsequent acts of war, were made. The blurring line between war and peace is defining for the last half-century, with all its grey-zone and hybrid *problematiques*, residing even in the very idea of a “Cold War” itself. Obviously, in Sweden’s case, the overwhelming destructive capacity of Sweden’s primary potential aggressor during this time, the Soviet Union, was a significant factor. De-escalation seems a very rational strategy for any small state in such an environment.

Finally, current Swedish defence policy is informed by the re-institutionalization of war. Going back to a territorial defence with a marked presence in the Baltic Sea is one such indication. Reviving the conscription system and enhancing Swedish-Finnish defence cooperation, as well as its recent application to join NATO, are further such circumstances, together hinting at an intention to uphold the institution of war as an international practice. Is the newly reawakened perception of threat at home an effect of a perceived changing security environment around the Baltic shores? Certainly – but that changing environment itself might be indicative of the continued relevance of war as an institution. If war were no longer seen as a practice guided by norms, beliefs, and expectations, that would be a sign of its decline as an institution. As it stands now, Sweden’s conduct indicates that the institutional standing of war is rebounding rather than in decline. Sweden will consider itself obliged to defend its coast for the foreseeable future.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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