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The NATO Sweden joined no longer exists

The government should investigate the possibility of terminating the DCA agreement

International politics is currently undergoing radical changes, but we might be moving towards what could rather be described as a historical normal state. According to realistic theory, international politics is characterized by anarchy, in the sense of the absence of a superior authority that can maintain law and order between states. However, the network of rules, norms and institutions that emerged in the post-war period, and especially the period after the end of the Cold War, has created a sense of predictability in the international system.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been seen as a violation of this order. The Russian military has undoubtedly acted brutally, far more than most could have predicted. At the same time, Russia has from the beginning been a peripheral and rebellious/oppositional actor in the imagined world order.

The role and dominance of the United States, however, is undeniable – even if American foreign and security policy has been marked by hypocrisy. While some sort of order has existed among America's allies and friends – what is sometimes carelessly called "the West" – the United States has not only tolerated but also actively created and fueled significant disorder globally. The United States has participated in more military conflicts than any other state, often with fatal consequences.

The Trump administration's latest statements and actions suggest that also this contradictory order is now about to implode. In the Swedish security policy debate, however, it sounds as if we are only witnessing a brief parenthesis in American foreign and security policy. "Maybe Trump's high-pitched tone is just a negotiating strategy?" "Is he simply trying to pressure NATO countries to pay more for Europe's defense?"

The Swedish debate continues to revolve primarily around Ukraine. It is understandable – the fight for Ukraine's independence has been a lighthouse/beacon for many over the past three years. But the situation in Ukraine also reminds us in a more general and unpleasant way of what anarchy means. In one of the records of realism, Thucydides' "The Peloponnesian War" (400 BC), it is stated that "the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must".

However, the risks apply not only to Ukraine but also to Sweden, and Swedish and Ukrainian interests do not always coincide. I therefore agree with the S

(Social Democratic) leader Magdalena Andersson about the urgent need for an updated Swedish security policy analysis. I am concerned that leading politicians do not share this view – most recently reflected in Foreign Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard's (M) (Moderaterna/liberal-conservatives)) statement last week that the security policy situation has not (!) changed.

Three questions should guide a new security policy thinking:

1. What kind of actor is the US? Leading democracy scholars agree that the US is rapidly moving in an authoritarian direction. The Trump administration's dealing with Ukraine and Gaza, as well as threats against the allies Denmark and Canada, also show an increasingly aggressive and blunt US imperialism than before. It is now directed not only against traditional enemies but also against allies and friends.

Many have interpreted Donald Trump's international agenda as isolationist, but his political movement seems to be driven by a similar interplay between pride and shame that we see in Russia and, to some extent, China: pride in America's inherent greatness, and a sense of entitlement, but also shame and resentment that the promise of greatness is not being fulfilled according to the plan.

Therefore, the Trump administration directs its aggression against the forces that are imagined to be hindering the United States, in the hope of thereby realizing the fulfillment of great power – a desire that is constantly slipping and can never be fully satisfied. Realists see these kinds of feelings as perfectly natural in great power politics, but I think it is more fruitful to view them as expressions of a deep-rooted psychopathology.

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2. What is happening with NATO? Sweden joined NATO just when the organization appeared to be at its most vulnerable state. The few of us who warned in spring of 2022 about Trump's possible return as American president and reminded of the double risks of alliances – being abandoned or drawn into a partner's war – were usually ridiculed and made suspect.

Despite all the talk of realism, not least from Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, the Swedish NATO decision was characterized by idealism and naivety. The organization that Sweden joined on March 7, 2024, in practice no longer exists. The transatlantic link is therefore not ours to cut – it is being cut by Trump's USA. Trying to take shelter from the storm for four years and hoping that some form of normality will reappear after the American presidential election in 2028 seems anything but reasonable.

3. What must Sweden do? American foreign policy now exhibits paranoid and manipulative traits similar to Russia's, and Sweden must therefore act with the same determination towards both states. This means setting clear and firm boundaries to avoid being controlled and exploited. After 80 years as a pseudo-ally and later an ally, it will be more difficult to cut the emotional dependence on the US, but Sweden should urgently investigate the possibility of terminating the DCA agreement and firmly avoid buying more American weapons systems.

The question about how much Sweden should invest in its own defense, and with whom we should cooperate, is more complex. Realists argue that peace is created through demonstrated strength, but are also usually painfully aware that opponents may perceive our defensive armament as a threat. They foresee a negative spiral of measures and countermeasures. The Danish intelligence service's recent warning about the risk of a major war between Russia and NATO countries should be understood in that perspective.

Although the issue is rarely discussed, there is also a limit to Sweden's support for Ukraine – a point where our own security interests are harmed more than they are benefited. That limit must be carefully guarded, based on the knowledge that all security policy is potentially uncertain and even dangerous – a question that is explored in more detail in the anthology "Är Sverige säkert nu? Perspektiv på Nato och svensk säkerhetspolitik" ("Is Sweden Safe Now? Perspectives on NATO and Swedish Security Policy") (Carlssons, 2024).

Realists rarely raise principled objections to forming alliances with authoritarian states. But now the opportunity is opening up to build an alliance on a more genuine democratic basis, beyond empty slogans, with the aim of establishing an alternative force field in international politics. The challenge is to try to change the psychopathology of great power politics in the long term – and at the same time, here and now, as actively as possible, counteract its most acute expressions without risking our own downfall.