

SWEDEN'S BID FOR A UN SECURITY COUNCIL SEAT AND WHAT AFRICA STANDS TO GAIN



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What Africa Stands to Gain

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COVER PHOTO: In his Dag Hammarskjöld Lecture in Stockholm on March 30th, 2016, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called Sweden "a superpower of solidarity, dialogue and cooperation". UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

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The Swedish government should involve the African diaspora in Sweden to secure the support of African countries in the UN. It also needs to clarify in what ways Sweden's feminist foreign policy is compatible with African values of respect and dignity for womanhood. These are a couple of recommendations provided in this policy note on how Sweden should act to improve relations with African countries and succeed in its ambitions to achieve the sustainable development goals of Agenda 2030.

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Sweden's campaign for a seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) for 2017-2018 is well advanced. The country is in a race with two other EU members, the Netherlands and Italy, both of which have had longer and more recent terms on the council, Sweden having last occupied a seat in 1997-1998 after two earlier terms in 1957-1958 and 1975-1976. As part of its campaign, the Swedish government has significantly scaled-up its international diplomacy, including actively engaging the five permanent UNSC members (United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China), the EU and the other Nordic countries. An unstructured survey of international media reveals the growing influence of Sweden as "a superpower of solidarity, dialogue and cooperation," whose sway is acknowledged in diplomatic circles, as highlighted in the 2016 Dag Hammarskjöld lecture delivered by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in Stockholm on 30 March 2016. Stories of Sweden's commitment to international peace and security, conflict prevention, human rights, human mobility, environmentalism, trade, development cooperation and sustainable development is widely acknowledged at home and abroad.

Sweden's external relations have traditionally focused on development assistance, conflict prevention, peacekeeping, the environment, refugees and trade. These key foreign policy issues are deeply rooted in

Sweden's domestic context: the country has the world's eighth-highest per capita income and ranks highly in indices of quality of life, health, education, protection of civil liberties, economic competitiveness, equality, prosperity and human development. In addition, Sweden is generally perceived to be among the most "generous" and "progressive" donors in the Nordic region. These attributes have no doubt supported the "determined Swedish effort to again find a precious seat at the UN Security Council," and ordinarily it should be a 'walk over' for Sweden. However, the political nature of the international system, and in particular the image of the UN as a big playhouse for power politics, have turned the struggle for UNSC membership into 'diplomatic warfare,' with all the characteristic bargaining and manipulation that implies.

Sweden became a member of the United Nations in 1946 and has remained committed to the mandates of the UN in its foreign policy since then. The UN is a multilateral platform used by state and non-state actors to pursue their interests. It accommodates the contending interests of states and at the same time seeks to promote global good. Sweden's bid for membership of the UNSC thus has wide-ranging dimensions and implications for domestic and international politics. These include concerns about the extent of domestic support for the Swedish Red-Green coalition government regarding this major foreign policy stride;

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and questions about whether now is the appropriate time for Sweden to seek renewed UNSC membership, given that it has already served on that body on three occasions. Also, there has been concern about whether Sweden can contribute significantly to the work of the UNSC. In other words, can Sweden withstand the political pressure that goes with a seat on the council, given its notably 'soft' disposition towards international power politics? Also, some may doubt whether Sweden could effectively balance its traditional commitment to human rights with active participation in the power politics characteristic of the UN system, in particular the council. The unimpressive state of global governance and international regulation not unexpectedly makes Sweden's struggle for a UNSC seat a matter of concern to Africa and other regions in the developing world that are in dire need of support from the international community to address development challenges.

Craving the UNSC

The behaviour of states in the international system is influenced by the pursuit of wealth, security and respect. These constitute the 'trinity of political goals' evident in the international system. Power and influence are key for the successful conduct of external relations by states. Often, states frame the three goals as part of their national interests, thereby presenting them as the goals to be pursued and maximised in the international arena. In this regard, these goals reflect the aspirations of the states. This explains why states would want to have a seat on the UNSC.

Over the years, there has been an aggressive struggle to institute regional seats on as non-permanent UNSC members. The reason for the scramble is mainly due to the pre-eminent role of the UNSC under the UN Charter, various articles of which invest the council with its powers and authorities. Firstly, although the UNSC consists of only 15 members, it acts in terms of Article 24, which states that: "In order to ensure prompt and effective actions by the UN, its members

confer on the Security Council, primary responsibility for maintenance of international peace and security. They also agree that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility, the Security Council acts on their behalf." Second, under Article 25, the UNSC has the authority to take decisions binding not only on its own members, but also on all members of the organisation: "The members of the UN agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the charter."

The third, and perhaps most important, reason for the importance of the UNSC is the veto power of its five permanent members. This provision is spelt out rather obliquely in Article 27, which states: "Decisions of the Security Council on procedural matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members. Decisions of the Security Council on all other matters, i.e. substantive issues, shall be made by an affirmative vote of the nine members including the concurring vote of the permanent members." This is the basic provision that relates to the veto.

UNSC | The United Nations' Security Council

- The UNSC has 15 members, each with one vote.
- Decisions require an affirmative vote of at least nine members.
- Five members are permanent and have veto power: China, France, Russia, UK and US.
- The 10 non-permanent members are elected by the General Assembly for two year terms.
- Sweden has previously held a UNSC seat on three occasions (1957-1958, 1975-1976 and 1997-1998).
- The vote for the five new countries that will take a seat on the UNSC for 2017-2018 will be held in the General Assembly on 28 June.

The fourth reason is that the UNSC is the only UN organ that sits permanently. The General Assembly meets at a prescribed time each year, although it can have emergency sessions. Article 28 specially states that the UNSC is to be organised in such a way as to function continuously. Finally, the Charter can only be amended by two-thirds of the members of the UN, including all the permanent members of the UNSC. In other words, any amendment to the UN Charter not to the liking of any permanent member can be vetoed in terms of Article 108.

The above account generally explains why member states scramble for seats on the UNSC. Apart from these general reasons, Sweden's case for UNSC membership is enhanced by a number of factors, including her diplomatic credentials.

Changes in Domestic and Global Contexts

The tail end of Sweden's quest for a seat on the UNSC presents an opportunity for brief reflection on the foreign policy of the current coalition government and assessment of its relevance to prevailing global issues. In this regard, it is important to take note of important recent developments in the Swedish political system that have serious implications for the conduct of international diplomacy and the pursuit of national interests. The foreign policy of a country is an extension of its domestic politics. Thus, Sweden's feminist approach to international relations is assumed to be strongly linked to the domestic environment, including the political elite's dominant perception of the international environment. In this regard, changes in the domestic political environment and governmental structure since 2014 and their impact on foreign policy direction and implementation are important background variables. For example, the outcome of the 2014 general election resulted in the formation of a minority government consisting of Social Democrats and Greens, and led by Prime Minister Stefan Löfven.

Whereas the coalition government remains committed to the fundamental principles guiding Sweden's external relations, such as neutrality and development assistance, its conduct of international diplomacy is increasingly sensitive to ethics, human rights, morality and feminism issues, which in some international circles are seen as running counter to "the demands of realpolitik." The leadership factor is playing a crucial role in redefining the foreign policy styles of the government. This is evident in the outspokenness and charisma of Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wall-

ström, whose commitment to feminist foreign policy enjoys the overwhelming support of the Social Democratic Party. It would seem that the Swedes are determined to launch a global crusade on the themes of human rights, democracy and feminism.

Added to these domestic factors are developments and changes in the international system. The world is experiencing changes with far-reaching consequences for North-South cooperation. For example, there has been an economic meltdown in Europe, which is compounded further by the global refugee crisis and the attendant rise in the cost of humanitarian interventions. Already these factors are having consequences for the funding of development cooperation. Also, the rise of neoliberal regimes in Europe is now a reality to contend with, just as the problematic demonstrations of support for extreme nationalism in several European countries are. What influence are these global currents having on Sweden's foreign policy?

Sweden's Credentials

In the words of Ban Ki-moon at the aforementioned Dag Hammarskjöld lecture, "Swedes have lived and breathed the United Nations for almost 70 years." During this period, successive Swedish governments have supported the mandates of the UN. For example, in addition to being one of the largest providers of core funds to UN agencies, Sweden is also the sixth largest provider of voluntary contributions to them.

Sweden has consistently demonstrated support for UN efforts to prevent and resolve conflicts through mediation and other peaceful means. Its support for engendering UN peace and security initiatives is also evident in its support for UNSC Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, and for the network of women mediators. With the adoption of a feminist foreign policy, Sweden is already promoting global consciousness about the differential consequences of violent conflict on men and women; drawing attention to the less visible traumas suffered by women and girls in conflict zones; and urging states and inter-governmental organisations to devise policies and programmes that acknowledge the vulnerability of women and girls during humanitarian crises.

Sweden has the first feminist government in the world and the importance it accords gender equality both at national and international levels is obvious. The country is ambitiously promoting a feminist approach to international relations, which seeks goals such as peace, justice, human rights and human development.



UN Photo / DN

Sweden has a historic reputation in the UN as an advocate for women's rights. Already in 1958, Sweden was the first country to appoint a female permanent representative to the UN, Ms. Agda Rössel.

This approach acknowledges the need to correct past injustices against women by adjusting existing policies relevant to all facets of life, including aid programmes, recruiting diplomats, drafting treaties or carrying out peacekeeping operations. That is, in the design and implementation of foreign policy, the past invisibility of women and other marginalised groups is to be corrected. Indeed, the current trend in Sweden's foreign relations has an antecedent in that Sweden became the first country to appoint a female permanent representative to the UN in 1958 in the person of Agda Rössel.

One central assumption in the feminist approach to international diplomacy is that discrimination against women is a risk and threat to peace and security within and between countries. The logical policy corollary is that promotion of human rights, commitment to morality and in particular preserving women's rights should be pursued even amidst international conflicts. According to Ms Wallström in a speech given to the US Institute of Peace in Washington on 29 January 2015, "striving toward gender equality is therefore not only a goal in itself, but also a precondition for

achieving our wider foreign, development and security policy objectives." Sweden is certainly bringing on board elements of gender equality, inclusiveness, human rights and representation.

Sweden has also consistently upheld human rights and universal values, including by being one of the largest donors to the United Nations Democracy Fund. In addition, Sweden's commitment to environmental sustainability, and in particular climate politics, is expressed in linking climate change to global security concerns.

The use of multilateral diplomacy by Sweden in the pursuit of its national interests has been very effective, within the limits of the country's capacity. Sweden's traditional values and orientation impose on her certain obligations and duties. In this regard, Sweden has championed issues at the UN as a key component of its multilateral diplomacy. Successive Swedish governments have accorded due respect to the United Nations in this regard. This has paid off for Sweden and in particular for the present coalition government, which in recent times has received more attention than ever

» Sweden is a superpower of solidarity, dialogue and cooperation «

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon

from the UN. Take for instance the Crown Princess, who is one of the 16 special ambassadors for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As Ban Ki moon succinctly observed during his 2016 Dag Hammarskjöld lecture: “All of this leads me to one conclusion: Sweden is a superpower of solidarity, dialogue and cooperation.”

Africa’s Gains and Expectations

African countries regard the UN as a central forum for the conduct of international diplomacy. As far as they are concerned, the relevance of the UN has never been in doubt. Thus, the implications of Sweden’s bid for a UNSC seat have likely attracted the attention of African countries. In particular, what difference is Sweden’s presence on the council likely to make to the ways the UN perceives Africa and addresses its challenges? A brief reflection on the role of Sweden within the UN system, especially her support for African issues, is a useful point of departure.

There is a long history of Swedish support for African interests in the international system. Sweden’s support for decolonisation in the 1960s and 1970s was remarkable in many respects. Both before and immediately after independence, Sweden’s development assistance to a number of African countries was a demonstrable example of constructive North-South partnership. Sweden’s relationship with Africa goes back a long way. Recently, in celebrating Africa Day in Stockholm, Margot Wallström, the foreign minister, had this to say:

What started as support for freedom, democracy and human rights has now developed into a partnership for tackling global challenges of mutual concern. Today, we see and welcome the strong ambition in Africa’s Agenda 2063 and its vision for Africa’s advancement. The African Union has made a strong point and an important commitment by announcing 2016 as the “African Year of Human Rights with par-

ticular focus on the Rights of Women.” Gender equality and the rights of women are cornerstones for Swedish society and for the Swedish feminist foreign policy. I am inspired by the leadership on gender equality demonstrated by the African Union.

Despite the changes in the global context, it is interesting that Sweden, in defining its relationship with Africa, recognises that “there is always something going on (in Sweden) that reminds us (the Swedes) of, and confirms, the strong links between Sweden and African countries.”

The international system is presently resting on a fragmented global governance architecture. The multilateral system is not working at its best, in spite of the rhetoric by states on their commitment to support cooperative global responses. Neither the formal Bretton Woods-United Nation system nor the informal plurilateral bodies such as the G8 and G20 Leaders’ Summits have demonstrated any potential or capacity to help Africa and other vulnerable regions in overcoming the constraining effects of global pressures. For instance, while discussions on Africa and the challenges of development still feature regularly on the agendas of international events convened mostly by international organisations and development partners, commitments to assist the continent are now generally tied to new aid conditionalities and other criteria that are justified in terms of the new aid effectiveness paradigm. Added to this is the shift in the concept and practice of development assistance funding. Powerful and rich countries in the global North are redefining their national interests and reshaping them in a less altruistic way. Not even the emergence of new global powers, notably Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC), has prevented this trend. The BRIC states are increasingly involved in current issues such as global trade, international security, climate change and energy politics. However, while they have shown global interest, they are not necessarily prepared to assume responsibility for international development.

» Rich countries in the global North are redefining their national interests and reshaping them in a less altruistic way «

While this goes on, many African governments and others in the global South are unable to effectively address many development challenges, especially those that have cross-border dimensions, such as pests, desertification, drought, climate change, HIV/AIDS, and drug and human trafficking. This is the context in which continued and consistent commitment to African development by the Swedish government in UN forums and other multinational institutions is most desirable for Africa. From its past track record, it is most probable that Sweden will remain committed to those principles and values that made it quite popular and attractive to Africa and the developing world, especially in view of the wider paradigm shift in aid and development assistance. Again it is appropriate to quote Foreign Minister Wallström's Africa Day address:

Sweden will stand alongside the people of Africa in the defence of human rights, in the struggle for democracy and peace, in the fight against climate change, in the promotion of better education and employment opportunities for young people, in the creation of better systems for migration, and in the many more challenges we face together. Let me end by concluding that Sweden is, and will continue to be, a Past, Present and Future Partner to Africa.

In another speech made on 12 May 2016 to a UN high-level meeting on sustaining peace in Africa, she stressed Sweden's commitment to defending and promoting "progress on the climate and development agenda" as well as the "a new global compact to promote peace and security." This commitment needs to be encouraged and consolidated through effective partnership with regional bodies such as the African Union (AU)

Sweden's commitment to global peace and security has been demonstrated in her significant contributions to UN peacekeeping operations over a long time. Records show that more than 80,000 Swedes have

served in such missions. For instance, Swedish troops are currently in Mali as part of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Also, discussions are going on in Swedish official circles to increase the number of police taking part in UN peace operations. This demonstrable commitment has continued to earn for Sweden respect among African countries and, it is generally assumed, entitles her to a seat on the UNSC.

The high visibility of Sweden in current global discourse on women, human rights, climate change and environmental justice, sustainable development and other related issues on the UN agenda is a blessing to Africa in many respects. Sweden is a leading advocate of more dedicated global attention to international development. Realising that the UN cannot do it alone, especially in an ever-changing international environment, Sweden strongly supports enlisting the assistance of regional and sub-regional organisations like the AU. Sweden is already showing interest in actual and potential capacities of the AU and is seeking to promote "an enhanced AU-UN strategic partnership" for the benefit of both organisations and the effective delivery of global public goods.

The global aid sector is experiencing a recession, which is made more acute by the global refugee crisis, among other issues. For example, many development organisations have lost funding as a result of cuts to aid budgets. Sweden still maintains high ODA levels even as other European countries, including other Nordic aid actors, use asylum seekers as an excuse for allocating less ODA. Sweden has come under pressure. For instance, in 2015 there was a suggestion to use 60 per cent of the development cooperation budget to fund domestic refugee costs. Guided by the need to protect "Sweden's international credibility," a 30 per cent ceiling was agreed on aid that could be allocated to such domestic costs. This trend raises concerns about Agenda 2030 goals for sustainable development. Africa and others in the developing regions expect Sweden to



Swedish troops are currently serving in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), like here at the opening ceremony of a campaign on prevention of violence against women in November 2015.

promote critical discussion within the UN system on aid and Agenda 2030.

African countries have a great stake in the UN and cannot ignore the power arrangement in its key institutions, including the UNSC. They continue to advocate reform of the UN system, including democratising its organs, especially the UNSC. Sweden's support for such democratisation and equitable representation and broad participation in the UNSC is undoubtedly very attractive to many African countries.

Policy recommendations

- Sweden's bid for a seat on the UNSC is legitimate, and in an uncertain global environment, timely. Generally, membership of the UNSC to some extent allows for influencing the operationalisation of UN mandates, including those that affect Africa. Sweden's geopolitical standing in the world and in Europe makes her a credible candidate for a UNSC seat. However, regardless of the outcome of its efforts to be elected, the Swedish government should pay attention to a number of concerns within Africa.
- Africa needs a more effective UN system to ensure peace, security and development. In spite of the much-chorused 'impressive growth' in many African countries, civil war is a constant threat in many poor and badly governed states. Poverty reduction, transparent and accountable governance, and citizen satisfaction with the delivery of public goods and service have shown no sign of significant improvement in many African countries. There is concern in several circles that Africa's development is likely to be neglected if nothing is done to ensure effective global governance and international regulation.
- The Swedish government has scaled-up its international diplomacy to boost its candidacy and campaign for the exalted membership of the UNSC. It is, however, not clear to what extent it has paid attention to African countries during the course of its campaign. Longer term, there is

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a need for more organised bilateral and multilateral engagement with African countries using both traditional diplomatic channels and other avenues. For example, Sweden has a significant African Diaspora population, which can be involved in campaigns like this one in order to secure the votes of African countries, or their support for other issues important to Sweden.

- Africa is a big continent, and the numerical strength of the Africa group in the UN is real. While Sweden has a seemingly close relationship with the AU, there is no evidence of strong bilateral relations with some of the key regional powers on the continent. It is possible Sweden is relying on Nordic diplomatic networks to leverage the support of African countries, especially in regions where it has low-level diplomatic representation. Sweden has been relying on its existing partnership with AU headquarters in Addis Ababa to leverage the support of the African group. For instance, in 2015 Minister Wallström was the guest of the president of the AU Commission at the African Union summit on the importance of women's empowerment to sustainable development. These are all possibilities. However, it is important to point out that bloc voting by African countries is not yet a dominant pattern at the UN. Therefore, to strengthen its influence in international affairs, it is important for the Swedish government to rethink strategies and incorporate campaign and lobbying plans that target individual African countries.
- The dominant official conception of a strong link between Swedish development assistance and international support for her bid for UNSC membership should not be overstressed. Remarkably, Africa's relationship with the EU and other donors has come under serious pressure since the end of the Cold War. Differences over human rights, political conditionality and aid effectiveness, with which Sweden is strongly associated, have given rise to concerns on both sides. While Sweden may have reason to remain committed to its positions, it is also important to recognise the sensitivities of certain African governments on these issues. For example, it is important that the Swedish government further clarify its feminist foreign policy, which may not in fact be incompatible with African social and cultural values of respect for the dignity of womanhood, but which are not acknowledged in the policy framework.
- Lastly, African countries are looking for the promise of increased trade. In this regard, Sweden may need to demonstrate a renewed interest in African economies, with special attention given to mutually beneficial trade relationships. In effect, Sweden needs to join forces with Africa in its demands for a better deal in global trade regimes.



"Sweden made a great contribution in support of the struggle for liberation in southern Africa", noted Enuga Reddy, who was Secretary of the UN Special Committee against Apartheid from 1963 to 1965, in a book published in 1998. His testimony is backed not least by the fact that Sweden was the first country outside of Africa that Nelson Mandela visited after his release from house arrest in 1990.





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About the Author



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