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Author: Carl-Oskar Bohlin



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GIDS

German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies

Bundeswehr Command and Staff College

Manteuffelstraße 20 · 22587 Hamburg, Germany

Tel.: +49 (0)40 8667 6801

buero@gids-hamburg.de · www.gids-hamburg.de

Carl-Oskar Bohlin*

The Swedish Total Defence Concept – A Whole of Society Approach to Resilience

Sweden and Europe are in the most severe security situation since the end of the Second World War. The rules-based world order, which has been our guiding light for 80 years, can no longer be taken for granted. Rapid and unpredictable events create disorder and the ground beneath us is shaking. This reality places high demands on all of us to understand the severity of the situation and to realize that time is of the essence.

It is therefore more important than ever that we work together to build resilience with our allies in NATO as well as raise the level of preparedness within the EU. An important contribution from Sweden in this respect is our total defence concept.

Total defence consists of two parts: military defence and civil defence. According to the Act on total defence and heightened state of alert, total defence means activities needed to prepare Sweden for war.

The government can decide on a heightened state of alert to strengthen Sweden's defence capabilities. This can happen for example in the event of a war or conflict in our immediate geographical area. During a heightened state of alert, the government has more freedom to act and make decisions and other laws can be used alongside those applicable in peacetime.

Civil defence entails all the contingency preparations made by civilian actors in peacetime and all the required civilian activities during war. Civil defence thus includes command structures, the supply of energy, food, drinking water, transportation, and electronic communications as well as financial services, health care and care for children and elderly people etc. Many different actors oversee these activities: government agencies, municipalities, regional bodies, voluntary organisations and of course private enterprises.

Since October 2022, Sweden has a new structure for civil defence, which entails 10 civil preparedness sectors (economic security; electronic communications and postal services; energy supply; financial services; basic data; health, medical care and welfare; food supply and drinking water; public order and security; transport and civil protection), 61 government agencies with specific responsibilities for civil preparedness and 6 civil defence regions at a higher regional level.

The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) is responsible for ensuring civil preparedness planning at national, regional and local administrative levels. MSB and the Swedish Armed Forces are jointly responsible for a coherent total defence planning process.

* Carl-Oskar Bohlin is serving as Sweden's Minister for Civil Defence. He studied law at Uppsala University and was a member of the Swedish Riksdag from 2010 to 2022 before being appointed to the Ministry of Defence in 2022. He is a member of the Moderate Party.

It is sometimes said that in order to see ahead, we must look back. Sweden has been lucky enough to have had peace for over 200 years. But during the Second World War, we realized that total war can only be met with total defence. We therefore spent the next 50 years building our total defence concept, which became an integrated part of society. It was, however, a system built on one single scenario, and with fall of the Berlin Wall, that specific scenario was no longer considered plausible. So, Sweden spent the following 15 years dismantling its total defence framework, especially the civil defence part.

In 2015, the government decided to reinstate total defence planning. By then society had completely changed: globalization, technical progress, just-in-time deliveries etc. The challenges we face today are in many ways very different from those of the past, and we therefore cannot simply rebuild the total defence system we once had.

Sweden is currently undertaking the largest reinforcement of its total defence concept since the end of the 1950s. In November last year, the government presented the Total Defence Bill 2025–2030, which stated that defence expenditures will reach 2.6 per cent of GDP in 2028 and 3.5 per cent in 2030. In June, the Swedish Parliament approved the Bill in a unanimous vote.

In order for Sweden to have a credible deterrence and a total defence system that can meet the demands of war, a strong civil defence component is also required. In 2028, approximately 1.5 billion euros per year will be invested in civil defence.

To convert funds into actual capabilities, we must assume national responsibility in the collective commitment to strengthen our society's resilience in civil defence. We do this by, for example:

Strengthening civil protection: Sweden has approximately 64 000 shelters to protect around 7 million of the Swedish population. We are now upgrading and modernising our shelters. We are also strengthening the ability of the municipal rescue services to handle the multitude of additional tasks that are inevitable during a heightened state of alert.

Activating civilian service: We have activated civilian service for the municipal rescue services and the electricity supply sector. We are working to ensure that civilian service will also be extended to other areas.

Strengthening security of supply and increasing private-public cooperation: For the supply of goods and services to function even under dire circumstances, national coordination, private-public cooperation, conditions for production conversion and the establishment of appropriate stockpiling methods are required. For example, stockpiles of healthcare products have been established for trauma care. The government has also appointed a national advisor for private-public collaboration.

Increasing cyber security: For a credible total defence system, all activities within civil defence need to have secure access to solid basic information, and our digital infrastructure and services must be robust, secure and functional even during a heightened state of alert or war. The government has made historic investments in cyber security with an associated action plan. We have also reformed our National Cyber Security Centre, which is now under the authority of the National Defence Radio Establishment, Sweden's national authority for signals intelligence.

Strengthening psychological defence and increasing the will to defend: The fact that Sweden has its own government agency for psychological defence is internationally unique. We have a long tradition of upholding a strong will to defend our country. The

will to defend can be said to be based on insight, will and courage. The individual's home preparedness is one of the fundamental parts of building a society's resilience. MSB's brochure 'In case of crisis or war', which was sent to all Swedish households last year, includes instructions on how to prepare for, and act, in case of crisis or war.

To put it in a nutshell: By clarifying that an attack against Sweden will be costly, the total defence concept together with diplomatic, political and economic measures will deter an aggressor from attacking Sweden or exerting influence by military means. Should an extreme situation arise, the total defence framework must have a credible war-fighting capability with both a military and a civil defence component.