

INTERVIEW WITH MR. JAKOB HALLGREN

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This interview took place on 14 October 2022 through Zoom. TPQ (Editor-in-Chief Aybars Arda Kılıçer and Associate Editor Ali Demircioğlu) asked several questions to Mr. Jakob Hallgren, the Director of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (Utrikespolitiska institutet, UI) since February 2022. TPQ cannot be held accountable for the respective views and opinions of the interviewee, whose permission is taken for publishing this interview transcription.

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* Mr. Jakob Hallgren is the Director of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (Utrikespolitiska institutet, UI) since February 2022.

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Aybars: Arguably per question is about Sweden and Finland's recent accession process to NATO. Considering the potential membership of Sweden and Finland into NATO, we would like to ask you what does Sweden think about increasing tensions between other alliance members, namely Türkiye and Greece? Like what is Sweden's position in this kind of tension?

Mr. Jakob Hallgren: Yeah, well, first, I should maybe say that since I'm representing the Swedish Institute of International Affairs, abbreviated as UI, which is actually the Swedish abbreviation I. We're an independent institute, so I'm not talking on behalf of the Swedish Government, but we, of course, happen to be in Sweden, so I think we have a fairly good view of what we think that the Swedish Government thinks on this. However, that is particularly difficult right today. We are in the middle of a power and government shift here. And it's right now at 10:00 o'clock that the incoming Prime Minister is presenting his Coalition partners, and it's only going to be on Monday when the new government is presented. And since this is a shift from a center-left government which has governed Sweden for eight years, to a center-right government supported by the Sweden Democrats, who are, I'm sure you know, a new force and rising force in Swedish politics.

I mean, what I am going to say today, well it's going to be less clear than if I had been talking about the previous government, for instance, because then I would have had a longer period to observe and assess their policies. However, that being said, I am of course fully aware of what the incoming parties have sent signals to this new government but I'm extrapolating and guessing a little bit. So, that is just a general reservation, but I think it's important for you if you send this later because you know on Monday, we know which party will hold, for instance the post of Foreign Minister, which is quite important for which courses are taken etc. So, there might be margin for some missed judgments here. Anyway, back to your question, well, I think, and we think that it is of course worrisome. I am saddened and regretful that we see that tensions between Greece and Türkiye are probably at the highest point in the last few weeks and months in many years. I mean, I will not make a judgment of the different causes, but I can only say that I think it's worrying to see that two

NATO allies are in such a verbal tip for that. I, of course hope that this will not translate into any kinetic violence or activities, skirmishes, however small they are. I think I would join everybody else, whether from the EU, NATO or the United States, who are calling for restraint and kind of a returning from this. You know diplomatic or verbal brinkmanship that, I think we are seeing. So that is of course as a source of concern for us. However, I think and hope that we're talking about two countries, which admittedly have different views on many things. Including territorial, borders, access to whatever natural resources under the seabed, etc., they will be able to find a compromise for a forward given that they are, after all, allies for many years and I would also like to mention. I think everybody is of course aware of this, but in considering the magnificent and quite unprecedented aggression that we're seeing in the Ukraine right now by Russia. I think it's important to keep the eye on that ball and remember that is the epic and major, big challenge to the security order that we want to have in Europe. So, that that may be a call for restraint and call for, coming back a little bit and trying to find a compromise solution. I understand this is not easy and I have full respect for the grievances that might be held on any side, often dating back very long history. But still, maybe a plea to also remember the bigger picture challenges here.

Aybars: Yes, sir, absolutely right. And, on that grant, we may move on to our next question. We would like to ask you, can you kindly tell us what policies you enacted after Russia invaded Ukraine since 24 February, especially like what influenced this unjustified attack had on the activities of your institute?

Mr. Jakob Hallgren: Actually, I only took up the position as director on 14 February. So, I mean, I started this job 10 days before Russia's full-scale invasion. I mean it's an incredibly important to remember that the war, Russia's attack and invasion and aggression already started in 2014, but it certainly took an enormous leap upwards on 24 February. This is more or less sided with when Sweden emerged out of the pandemic. With all these two restrictions being lifted. So, this meant overnight, you know. We had been covering this and commenting on this for obviously a long time. We had followed the build-up over the last two years and maybe starting more in earnest after Russia ultimatum on 17 December last year with a lot of speculation. Where it would go etc. But it certainly took a new turn after 24 February. In our institute we have several programs and centres. One of them is in the stock of Centre for Eastern European Studies, a National Centre of Excellence housed at our Institute. So, they have been extremely busy in. In both explaining to the wider Swedish public, and increasingly to an international audience "what happened and how Russia and President Putin could engage in such seemingly completely inflicting such a lot of damage from themselves and the willingness to take such huge losses and the complete disrespect, both for norms and human lives and any

previous agreements. How on Earth was it possible that Russia would take such a bizarre course?"

We've been extremely busy explaining this to the wider public, analysing and advising the Swedish decision makers and policymakers. Those were the ones who were most directly affected. But we have other researchers and analysts covering other areas such as China, Europe, the Middle East, the wider Asia, Transatlantic Relations etc. And all of them were involved in this because there are ripple effects, consequences, and views on this, which differ somewhat around the world. As you know very well so.

So, I would say that the whole Institute has kind of worked suddenly towards this overarching conflict and both explaining it and researching about it, so it's meant a huge increase in interest for what we do. We've trying to follow suit and live up to those expectations.

Aybars: Yes, thank you very much and maybe we can also talk briefly about your expectations about post Ukrainian War Europe, like what is your vision for this setting? Like what do you expect? There will take place after this kind of bloody war build and like do you think the European states will have to put more on their budgets of defence or any other kind of trajectory is possible?

Mr. Jakob Hallgren: Of course, all countries in Europe as a whole who had not committed to the 2 percent of GDP Goal for defence spending and I hear is increasingly that is going to be considered the floor around the ceiling did so for obvious reasons because everybody realized that given the complete disrespect for any norms, for any countries to be able to decide and determine their security policy courses etc. have of course made everyone realize that we need to step up in a in unprecedented ways that we haven't seen since the end of the Cold War, in Sweden case. I think also in Finland case. However, I cannot talk so much about Finland even though I know them very well.

So, I think that when the Russian Government in December claim that "there needed to be spheres of influence and that countries who were not decided to be nonaligned, had to be nonaligned that they could not choose any longer which security allegiances they wanted to have that that message essentially. The Russia earlier said that they wished for countries to be nonaligned, but after that day they said they must be nonaligned." That was a red, uh, that was already there, a red line for Sweden and Finland. And that was compounded by the actual stepped-up aggression in February.

It took a couple of Weeks and months, but it became apparent to everybody after a while that this was unacceptable. So, we decided to in broad agreement and with a big support From the Quite a Swedish Public and in Parliament to apply for NATO membership. Because we simply saw that there was no space for this. You know nonalignment and previously neutral stances that we had Built our security policies for on so long. So, that was of course a huge mental shift for our Sweden and also Finland and then they stepped up defence spending as you mentioned, but also you know an unprecedented willingness in broad agreement to support the account to punish the aggressor in blatant violation of the UN Charter, in this case Russia and to support the Ukraine party not only politically, not only economically, but also which was also quite unprecedented by sending arms. Which I mean in Sweden case is it had not happened that we had sent arms to a Party in an ongoing conflict since 1939 and the last time we did that was when we sent arms and volunteers to assist Finland. When the Soviet Union had attacked Finland in the fall of 1939. So, I mean several of those decisions were you know, quite extraordinary and quite unprecedented, I would say.

Aybars: Yes, and maybe we can also talk about this kind of Sweden's turning to NATO and like what do you think about the American-Swedish relations on that ground? Like what new opportunities and possibilities does Sweden assertion to NATO?

Mr. Jakob Hallgren: Yeah, well, maybe you asked also about the vision for a post Ukrainian war in in Europe, and I didn't respond to that. But let me just underline that.

Just because Russia has violated the European Security order doesn't mean that the European security order doesn't exist any longer. We might have to adapt the European security structures to cope with a rogue country that is not respecting the rules that everybody else is agreeing to. But of course, we will continue to defend and believe in all the values which are enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act the Paris Charter of the OSCE, the inviolability of territorial borders, the Right for any country to choose their security path, the respect for human rights both internally and externally, et cetera.

All of that is incredibly important to remember and our vision for a post Ukrainian war in Europe is of course, that we will have, unfortunately with military means they convinced Russia that they are on a completely erroneous path in what they are doing at that. But we have to come back to the type of for all, Respect that has somehow, Reigned for the last three decades. Otherwise in in Europe. With obviously some notable examples, but never at this scale. So, I just wanted to add

that on the previous question.

And then yeah, well on the Swedish American relations. Sweden has been nonaligned or neutral for a more than 200 years, not always a glorious nonalignment and neutrality but nevertheless, never a party of Military alliance. We're not yet a part of NATO. We remember, we're applying to become members. But I mean the links and relations to the United States have been very close and warm since the Second World War. There's a lot of cultural language affinity, and a third or I think 25 percent of Sweden's population at least immigrated in the 19th century to the United States.

So, there are many Scandinavian descendants in the U.S. My wife has kind of family there. I mean, there's a lot of kind of links of that kind. Sweden is certainly not the only country who's got links to the United States. I'm sure Türkiye has a lot of immigrants in the U.S. as well. There are both cultural and family links Sweden always chose together with Finland and other countries to be nonaligned after the Second World War, but still there were very close and warm relations respecting that that you know different parts, but after the end of the of the Cold War, Sweden became a member of the NATO Partnership for Peace. For many years it has been said that Sweden and Finland and I think Ukraine as well have been among the closest as close as you could be a NATO without being a member and without being covered by Article 5 collective security guarantees, et cetera. If this membership process is consumed and finalized, which we of course hope, Sweden will become a full and formal ally to the U.S.

Such as to Türkiye, of course. Which is important to remember. We fully realize this is a collective commitment covering all of the allies, Portugal, Türkiye, Norway, The United States, etc. But of course, the United States is the biggest of the allies and the Supreme and ultimate current tour, given the size of their military, economy, standing in the world, etc.

We will become allies hopefully as I have said. And what exactly this will mean in practical terms in terms of changed foreign security defence policy, is of course you know still in in the making but the wishes very much there to kind of to make it work along the lines of how other allies in the NATO in NATO are developing or have developed their ties with the U.S. and new members.

And I think there is actually reciprocal appreciation, not only from the U.S. I think that currently all countries apart from Hungary and then Türkiye have already ratified the memberships.

I think it's not only the U.S., but all of the countries have in a fairly quick process as well, have signalled that they see a huge benefit in in Finland and Sweden joining NATO and that has to do with the Nordic Baltic region will be easier to defend against Russia's aggressive and unresponsive, irresponsible behaviour. So that's one thing from a military security policy point of view and the other is of course a country like Russia who wanted to scare countries from not joining NATO, having Sweden and Finland applying was of course a huge loss of faith and a huge snob. It was one of the proofs on the diplomatic front that this whole adventure was completely flawed, because I don't think it would have happened unless Russia had behaved us as they are doing.

So, all of that taken together, I think it will strengthen relations between Sweden and all of the allies including Türkiye, including Germany, France, the UK and of course the United States and all of the others.

Aybars: Yes, actually we want to also talk a bit about, Sweden and Turkish relations. As you know, Türkiye has been a member candidate for the European Union for decades. Probably the longest kind of candidates in the line, and considering the role of Türkiye in Sweden, a Swedish accession to NATO. Do you think there might be a more positive climate for a European Union membership for Türkiye as well? Like what do you think about?

Mr. Jakob Hallgren: I followed this process. It started a long time ago and it is, I mean formally still ongoing. But for all practical purposes not very much is happening I am afraid, and I mean, it would require a long lecture to go into all of the reasons and who is responsible for where we are today. But on your question whether the current accept Swedish and Finnish accessory process might affect the Turkish application to the European Union, I'm afraid I have to say, I'm a little bit worried that the way Türkiye positions are judging from the number of ratifications, say a minority view. I am not sure that will serve. You know that will enhance Turkish chances in the membership application process regarding the European Union.

Yeah, I mean the European Union accession process is certainly long and incremental, and even if Sweden or other individual member countries would take on an even more positive role to enhancement, there are so many other countries. Other factors in comparison, I guess that the NATO accession process is briefer, because EU accession includes so many chapters which has to do with. Fundamental values and many competitiveness criteria, anti-corruption, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

So, this is I think it's a little bit difficult to compare right away. I am afraid that this kind of reluctances or kind of strong statements from Türkiye, which are of course fully legitimate. I'm not so sure that that would be, you know, would help Türkiye in the EU accession process. So, It remains to be seen where that will end, but if you ask me straightforwardly that that's my personal assessment.

Aybars: Our next question has two parts actually in the first part, we ask which topics points to the highest importance for the activities of your institute, and furthermore the second part of the question is what influence did the developments since COVID pandemic? Which had on the priorities of this research, kind of concerns of yours?

Mr. Jakob Hallgren: We cover many things at the Institute, the novelty at our Institute right now is that we last year, established to national Centres of Excellence, one for China and one for Eastern Europe, including Russia.

Of course, that I mentioned before with, big resources for our size. So that's a new departure and new development, which means a lot of focus is on making sure that the centres are well established and get up and running and do what they're supposed to do. Because we're in the middle of that build up process which started last year and ends next. Year when they were reached like a cruising speed or altitude. But this doesn't mean we are not focusing on any other ongoing areas.

We have a Europe program covering all aspects of European affairs. Sweden is going to take over the rotating Presidency of the European Union. From 1 January, this is not the rotating Presidency as it was before Lisbon with the Lisbon Treaty, but it is. It's still an important role, and there's a lot of meeting where the Presidency needs to, take charge and chair and to some extent, steer. The actions of the Union for respect of the President of the Council and the High Representative, foreign affairs, etc.

So, we're currently focusing quite a lot on preparing for that, making sure that Sweden becomes a responsible and good chair pushing the agenda of the Union. Maybe setting aside our national priorities for a while to kind of push the wider EU agenda and where, by the way, enlargement, your earlier question is certainly one. Your question, I think will be on the agenda, even though that is of course currently very much driven by the recent announcement to make Ukraine and Moldova candidate countries and the invitation Georgia to become one. But I guess this will also put all of the other candidate processes in the limelight, so that's one area.

We are also covering the wider Asia. In the Pacific, what's happening there. The China Centre is certainly looking at China. Still, the new geopolitical rivalries and realities mean that we need to look much closer at what is happening in Asia.

And then we have the Middle East and North Africa program. Because even though we are based up here in the North, we realize the importance of EU relations with the Mediterranean and the countries in the Mediterranean. That, of course, includes Türkiye, but also the rest of the Middle East, is incredibly important and wider in Africa, etc.

And then finally we have a program focusing on more global affairs where one of the key strands is the green transition climate change, climate negotiations and those kinds of global necessary processes which cannot stop. It should not stop even though we have had the biggest war on European soils since the Second World War.

Then maybe finally another area. We are looking increasingly into the relation between the economy and technological development and geopolitics. How we increasingly see that, in the economy, new technologies are becoming instruments, and in geopolitical competitions, notably between the United States and China, but that affects us all in in in different ways.

And these are areas that we need to understand. Especially, a small, technologically advanced and export dependent country like Sweden needs to understand those issues. Geopolitics enters virtually any field these days, and I think that's incredibly important to understand more whether it has to do with, you know, academic collaboration or decisions at the municipal or regional level. Or you know for that matter. Telecommunication is a major area of interest for Sweden given Ericsson et cetera.

So, there's no lack of important areas to cover and then maybe also finally understanding and respecting the fact that there are different views in the world on global events. We're currently seeing some kind of a battle of narratives.

How should Russia's war in the Ukraine highlight the current geopolitical changes. How should that be understood and how? Why is? It so that. Some countries see that differently. You would draw different conclusions than others on this in this conflict. There's no lack of important areas and I wouldn't like to put one above the other. Because we're all in it, but maybe with this kind of EU presidency lens, a major issue for Sweden and Finland will be to follow how the NATO application process unfolds so far. Of course, Türkiye is a key player in this. I would love to hear your

view about this.

We are currently not conducting any research on global health. However, it's quite obvious propose what I just said before about this, polarisation globally, and battle of narratives, et cetera,

We have realised that there is a frustration among many countries who feel that they were not allowed to receive the vaccines et cetera, and that that is kind of playing into this. It's a discussion now about the war in Ukraine etc.

Some of them are saying: 'So, you are asking us to take sides on this conflict, but we are still disappointed. We were not able to receive vaccines.' This is part of a narrative which is quite unfortunate. Where that is somehow affecting the judgement on the on this a question of a breach of the United Nations Charter, etc.

So, in that sense, we're following it a little bit. However, we're not conducting research on that particular issue.

Aybars: We have two questions about your branches. And like one of them concerns with the activities of your research regarding China. We would like to ask whether the recent crisis in Taiwan Strait influenced your research, and what is your approach to the crisis between China and Taiwan?

Mr. Jakob Hallgren: It is obvious that the recent escalation of tensions around Taiwan, in December coinciding with the U.S. speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit has also increased the interest in Sweden and, you know, started a debate about that in in Sweden and the whole issue of the relations. So, you know we are doing research on this, but we're not taking a particular position or stands. And as we all know, this is a very delicate balance so and it is ongoing. So, I cannot give you a particular position there or here or there in either direction regarding that position. We're not doing that as an institute, but these are issues that we're looking at and the reports will be forthcoming, but they are still in the pipeline. Note that there is a big standoff in these issues between China and the United States and the rest of the world. I mean Sweden as a country does not have a diplomatic presence in Taiwan, like most other countries. And still, we are worried about the tensions as they are increasing for the whole of Northeast Asia.

I used to be the ambassador in the Republic of Korea. So, I have seen this at close range how these tensions are not only around Taiwan but in the whole region with North Korea, et cetera. We are extremely worrying, and we would like to do whatever

is possible to kind of deescalate. In the case of North Korea, they of course need to change position and go away from the development of a nuclear programme, et cetera, et cetera. So, so that's what I have to say on that issue.

Aybars: Thank you very much. Our second question kind of focuses on your Middle East and North Africa (MENA) programme and we would like to ask your opinion regarding the changing dynamics of the Middle East? Especially between Israel and other prominent regional lenders. I would like to ask what your position as an institute regarding the peace attempts between Israel and Palestine and other actors is which embodied in recent Abraham Accords.

Mr. Jakob Hallgren: Well, the Abrams Accords and the states involved. That were of course not previously at war. So, I think we welcome that as a good step towards general de-escalation of tensions in the Middle East. But please remember that we do not take positions as an Institute, these are my assessments as the Director.

You also alluded to, the main problem, which is the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian, state is still not solved and that remains. There is no visible or clear progress for that right now. So yes, the Abrams Accord were very good as a step forward, but there is still a lot of work to do and obviously there are still many tensions in the conflict. You are very close to it. So, you know that much better than we do, how the war in Syria is still raging even though maybe at a lower level than before, but it's still there and people are still dying and in relations with Iran and between Iran and Israel and with Saudi Arabia there is many on unsolved issues we're following closely. I don't have a panacea or a recipe for how that should be solved, but clearly, as you said, the Abrams Accords was, you know, one step not enough to create a more general atmosphere of de-escalation, but one. important step,

I hope it could be followed by others so, and I'm sure you have a lot of views on that as well, there's many aspects of that that. You, as a country are involved which we you know fully understand and respect.

Aybars: Thank you, Mr Jacob Hallgren, and I mean that was a very interesting and informative talk. We are delighted to meet with you as well as having you in this valuable interview.