



Branding ‘progressive’ security: The case of Sweden

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Abstract

Contemporary research on so-called Nordic branding has provided crucial insights into the social power of states and how various actors use and circulate ‘progressive’ nation brand tropes for political and commercial goals. Hitherto, the literature on Nordic branding has focused on a wide range of substantive issues, among other things, human rights, gender equality, social welfare and foreign aid, but considerably less attention has been paid to the topic of security. The present article adds to a small but established literature on how the security sphere is increasingly entangled with nation branding. In the Nordic region, we argue, the latter is particularly evident in the case of Sweden – one of the world’s largest per-capita arms exporters in the post-Cold War era but also a country known and often revered for its peaceful and progressive image. Focusing on the case of Sweden, the article contributes to knowledge of how defence industry-related actors (both public and private) draw on and frame nation branding tropes to sell and legitimise their products and services to both insiders (domestic constituents) and outsiders (the global security market).

Keywords

defence industry, framing, Nordic branding, progressiveness, security branding, Sweden

Introduction

‘It is a human right to feel safe’. These are the words used by Sweden’s largest weapons manufacturing company, Saab AB¹ (henceforth Saab), to explain that company’s vision and mission in recent years (Saab, 2020). While such statements may be considered superficial or common marketing slogans used by corporations, their discursive implications are more profound. For example, the literature on security branding has highlighted how security has ‘become a key selling point in the practice of place branding’ (Coaffee and van Ham, 2008: 191). Furthermore, it is suggested that security branding ‘adds value

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to, or at least reconfigures, existing brand images, and creates Unique Selling Points (USPs) for political actors and places' (Coaffee and van Ham, 2008: 191).

For the most part, research on security branding has focused on how state and non-state actors deploy strategies to manage safe and secure images of a place. Less explored, however, is how the brand image of places (broadly defined) that are already perceived as safe, secure, and peaceful is used to sell security – be it security products or services. Such oversight is perhaps most evident regarding the Nordic region. Except for Iceland, most Nordic countries² have substantial security industries. While these industries have been mainly geared towards domestic consumption, their operations have incrementally adopted a transnational reach over the past 30 years. The latter has resulted in some Nordic countries becoming significant security technologies and weapon systems providers. Concomitantly, the Nordic countries are widely perceived and indeed branded as the 'do-gooders' in international affairs (de Bengy Puyvallée and Bjørkdahl, 2021) – evidenced by striking descriptions of the Nordics as 'agents of a world common good' (Bergman, 2007) and 'moral superpowers' (Dahl, 2006). The question fronting our investigation is: How do defence industry actors (both public and private) strategically frame such 'progressive' place or nation brands to sell and legitimise security products and services?

In this exploratory article, we focus on Sweden. As a country setting, Sweden is an interesting case study for the following reasons: It has had a long history of military non-alignment³ and of being recognised as a 'neutral' country and has not been at war with another state since 1814 – marking one of the longest uninterrupted periods of peace experienced by any state in the world (Bjereld and Möller, 2016). Sweden's international reputation regarding neutrality and military non-alignment, some suggest, has been strategically used as a branding asset by state and non-state actors to set it apart from other peace-promoting countries such as Norway (Nissen, 2021). However, since the mid-1900s, Sweden has also had a significant arms industry supporting its so-called 'total defence' model. Rather uniquely for its size, the country produced weapon systems for all military branches – air, land and sea – domestically, largely thanks to significant investments into military research and development (Stenlås, 2008). When Sweden's security policy was reprioritised and defence budgets diminished in the 1990s and 2000s, major arms companies like Saab were forced to internationalise and focus increasingly on exports. This impetus makes the Swedish industry a significant player in the global arms trade today and places it in the unusual company of some of the most powerful states in the world (Burja, 2022).

Although Sweden's foreign and security policies have received serious scholarly attention over the years, its defence industry has been largely overlooked in the branding literature. Hence, our article aims to not only contribute to existing research on Nordic branding (namely, its practices and consequences) by bringing critical attention to the topic of security. It also contributes to a deeper understanding of how defence industry-related actors (both public and private)⁴ frame symbolic notions surrounding a particular version of 'progressive' nation branding tropes for commercial purposes. Drawing on Coetzee and Berndtsson's (2023) analysis of Sweden's security economy, we treat Sweden's public and private security actors as two sides of the same coin because, historically, these actors have been unusually intertwined concerning arms production and

export. In other words, our study assumes that public and private interests do not compete side by side or in a dichotomy but that they are fundamentally embedded due to the long history of corporatism (Coetzee, 2017) and deep interdependencies between the state's defence sector and certain weapons manufacturers. Today, these interdependencies are perhaps best illustrated by the notion of 'Team Sweden' – an organisation and marketing platform gathering the public and private actors responsible for, among other things, arms export promotion. Marketing material and statements by actors associated with Team Sweden will be the central empirical focus of our analysis.

The article proceeds as follows: The next section provides an overview of nation branding and security branding literature and then transitions to a discussion regarding Nordic branding, with a particular focus on Sweden. The core message running through these diverse, albeit often connected works is how the immaterial elements of identity are tied to material outcomes in political and economic affairs. The following section sets out the conceptual grounding of our study, explaining how framing theory and frame analysis provide us with useful analytical tools to conduct the empirical investigation and answer our research question. In the third section, we analyse how defence industry actors strategically use the so-called 'progressive' Swedish nation brand to frame, sell and legitimise their products and services. Using progressiveness as our master frame, we highlight key examples in the areas of innovation and technological edge, humanitarianism and political impartiality, and transparency and arms regulation. We conclude the article by discussing the wider implications of our findings and consider how future studies can pursue these.

Nation branding and security branding

The literature on nation branding has grown rapidly over the past 20 years. Yet, despite the proliferation of research on this subject, there is little consensus about the exact meaning and scope of nation branding. In its broadest sense, nation branding is concerned with the complex branding of 'a country's whole image [. . .], covering political, economic and cultural dimensions' (Fan, 2010: 98). Most research on nation branding focuses on how or why nations brand themselves – be it through public diplomacy or public relations marketing campaigns – in order 'to build a recognisable image, as strong as commercial brands, to evoke a positive impression' (Anzera et al., 2019: 80). But regardless of which approach to nation branding you subscribe to, be it the technical and economic approach, political frames, or cultural theories, there seems to be a general agreement among scholars and practitioners that nation branding is concerned, in one way or another, with strategic action.

Following the critical tradition of the nation branding research (cf. Aronczyk, 2013; Kaneva, 2016; Valaskivi, 2016; Varga, 2013), we perceive nation branding as a socio-political instrument and an asset deployed by powerful state and non-state actors for enhancing a level of competitive advantage on transnational markets of goods, services, and reputation. That is, consciously pursued activities – and the strategic logic underlying them – that do not occur randomly but are initiated by someone for some purpose. Nation brands, we argue, are crude depictions of national identities because, indeed, 'brands are designed to be more stable [and] are inherently less nuanced and therefore

represent a closing down, and simplified representation of national identities' (Clegg and Kornberger, 2010: 9). As Aronczyk (2008) noted, branding is primordial in the sense that it excludes a broader diversity of competing national identity narratives. That is to say, it 'concerns the construction of [. . .] narratives which are necessarily selective in what they include and leave out', that is, 'non-neutral stories of a perceived objectively existing nation' (Jeziarska and Towns, 2018: 56). In short, nation branding is about the competition of storytelling (Winder, 2020) of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983).

Storytelling is crucial to elicit an emotional resonance to a place (van Ham, 2001) and emotional ties to 'a political philosophy of a nation and what that nation might stand for' (Browning, 2015: 201). Nation branding, in that sense, is 'intermestic' – international and domestic at the same time – since it deals with national identity narratives that contain interrelated elements of how an actor (or group of actors) 'experiences itself (identity) and how it tries to project itself to others (image)' (Zaharna, 2016: 4408). As Jansen (2008) argues, 'branding not only explains nations to the world but also reinterprets national identity in market terms and provides new narratives for domestic consumption' (p. 122). To that, we may add aspects entailing elements of status and prestige (Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira, 2017; Clerc et al., 2015).

The small but established literature on security branding, however, illustrates that security 'has become an important dimension in promoting places and nations' (Mihaila, 2015: 427) precisely because security is such a scarce commodity (Avraham and Ketter, 2008; Coaffee and van Ham, 2008). To date, the lion's share of the security branding literature has focused on how regions, states, 'places' and, on occasion, private actors actively pursue a perceived need to appear secure and safe. It is argued that the simple logic driving such compulsion is that insecurity can damage a place's brand and reputation. However, the security branding literature also differs considerably in terms of 'what is being branded' (e.g. safe and secure physical and institutional conditions, and government and corporate policy); at what scale (e.g. neighbourhood, city, national, regional and transnational); and for what reasons (e.g. business location choices, inward investment confidence, tourism or boasting an organisational resilience image). Nevertheless, they all broadly assume that the basic underlying notions of security and insecurity are socially constructed (cf. Buzan et al., 1998) and include 'processes that deal with perception and reputation' that are 'consistently and deliberately managed' (Coaffee and van Ham, 2008: 192). As pointed out earlier, less explored in this literature is the inverse relationship between how peaceful and 'progressive' places use their image to frame, sell and legitimise security products and services. One region has been at the forefront of actively pursuing such an image, namely, the Nordic region.

Nordic branding with a particular focus on Sweden

The literature on Nordic branding has mostly focused on how the Nordic states' brands are used, circulated and admired. It is argued that the Nordic brand constitutes a particular type of socio-political culture and socio-economic organisation that signifies uniqueness in relation to other country or regional brands (Cassinger et al., 2019). The interrelated parts of this so-called regional brand are predicated on a range of factors, *inter alia*, generous foreign aid policies, international solidarity, gender equality, penal

humanitarianism, peace promotion and conflict mediation, social welfare and environmentalism, to name a few (UIO, 2018). Taken together, these and other features apparently distinguish the Nordics from others in the international domain.

In recent years, however, a growing body of research unpacking some of the paradoxes of Nordic exceptionalism has emerged alongside normative and moral imaginaries of the Nordics. Such research provides much-needed nuance and complexity to a subject so often shrouded in myth and stereotyping. The mainstay of this scholarship questions the notion of Nordic exceptionalism by highlighting a wide array of contradictions (Simons and Manoilo, 2019), together with growing challenges to the comparative reputational advantage of the ‘Nordic brand’, *inter alia*, issues concerning gender equality (Larsen et al., 2021), and Nordic humanitarianism (de Bengy Puyvallée and Bjørkdahl, 2021). There are also emergent critiques of how the Nordic countries have responded to recent ‘crises’ such as the refugee crisis (Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2021) and the Covid-19 pandemic (Milne, 2020), which some argue, have diminished the notion of so-called ‘Nordic exceptionalism’.

Notwithstanding mounting critical reflections, analysts still generally agree that the Nordic brand has retained an unusual level of ‘stickiness’ and ‘resilience’ (Browning, 2021) and remains mostly unchanged in domestic, regional, and international circles despite previous suggestions that the Nordics have become ‘just another region’ and ‘not so exceptional after all’ (Browning, 2007). These issues were eloquently captured at the 2020 and 2021 academic conferences on *Nordic Branding* in Oslo, Norway, where the contributors underscored how the Nordic brand has remained largely unaltered in the eyes of many audiences and continues to be strategically used by state and non-state actors for political and commercial goals. Yet despite such observations, the topic of security was largely absent during panel discussions, which is a surprising omission, especially in the case of Sweden – one of the largest per-capita arms exporters in the post-Cold War era (Burja, 2022),⁵ but also the Nordic country with arguably the most prominent position in international political discourse (Andersson and Hilson, 2009) regarding its ‘peace-promoting’ and supposedly ‘feminist’ foreign and security policy (Aggestam and Rosamond, 2018; Sundström et al., 2021).

Although the Nordic branding literature has largely overlooked Sweden’s security and defence sector, scholars in other fields have indeed brought attention to Sweden’s conflicting foreign policy vis-à-vis arms trade, that is, championing peaceful and ethical practices on an international stage while at the same time promoting increased militarisation and upholding the interest-driven preferences of the arms political economy (Åkerström, 2016; Coetzee, 2021; Karp, 2015). There is also a rich literature exploring Sweden’s ‘militarised neutrality’ as a form of state and citizen identity construction (Agius, 2006; Jackson, 2019) as well as the Swedish defence establishment’s and arms industry’s efforts to frame themselves increasingly as ‘societal’ or ‘civil’ security actors (Larsson, 2019). The analysis below will continue to build on Larsson’s (2020) previous analyses, in particular, complementing his findings with new empirical material and analytical tools focusing more directly on branding practices (rather than the arms industry’s turn to civil security technologies).

While most studies have not analysed Swedish security policies, products and services specifically in terms of nation branding, there is established literature that has

identified common traits believed to represent so-called ‘Swedishness’ regarding a wide range of issues, among others, Sweden’s willingness over the years to act as a mediator and bridge-builder during conflicts (Bjereld, 1995; Hagemann and Bramsen, 2019); make use of international organisations for championing common values (i.e. human rights, democracy, gender equality, peace and environmentalism) (Björkdahl, 2013; Dahl, 2006); promote extensive solidarity with the Global South (Bergman Rosamond, 2016; Sellström, 2002) and pursue a neutral and non-aligned security policy (af Malmborg, 2001; Bjereld and Möller, 2016).

These identified traits, we acknowledge, are not unproblematic or referring to what is ‘true’ necessarily but rather ways in which Swedishness has been perceived (by both insiders and outsiders), enacted and used by state and non-state actors for various purposes. We also acknowledge that these normative and moral imaginaries of Swedishness endorse the myth and stereotypes so often associated with the Nordics – something which critical scholars have argued we should guard against. However, taken together, these traits illustrate that Swedishness is not an ‘empty concept’ but a large tent and home to a wide range of substantive orientations. Overall, *progressiveness* seems to be the key theme that encapsulates the broader idea of Swedishness and the thread connecting various tropes associated with the nation brand. It is, therefore, unsurprising to see that this theme shapes the official Sweden brand.

Since 2007, Sweden has formally adopted a nation brand, defining itself as a progressive country. The latter is conceptualised in the following manner by the Swedish Institute (2008, the organisation responsible for designing, managing and maintaining the brand):

Sweden’s image is based on a combination of shared values that stand out in an international perspective. They give Sweden a unique, attractive position that is firmly grounded in Swedish history and the present day. The country’s gradual change, with an emphasis on openness to new ways of thinking and ethical values, together with the drive for balance, can be summarised by saying Sweden is a country focused on development based on people’s needs and environmental conditions. This, in turn, can be summarised by the term progressive

In addition to the term progressive, the keywords underlying the official brand are ‘open’, ‘authentic’, ‘caring’ and ‘innovative’, which, it is suggested, has become the bedrock of Sweden’s value-based image and formal nation branding strategy.⁶ Pamment and Cassinger (2018) recently noted that Sweden’s nation branding strategy, as in other countries, has been geared towards ‘crystallising [a] kind of nationalistic storytelling and persuading its citizens not just to buy-in to the basic ideas (or “core values”) but to actively and deliberately choose to represent them’ (p. 566). After all, as most critical nation branding literature tells us, strategic nation branding practices aim to generate a boomerang effect.

Without injecting value judgements of our own, our study takes inspiration from the various notions above regarding Swedishness and the central theme of progressiveness – not only how it is informed by the official Swedish brand (as designed and maintained by the Swedish Institute) but also how traits believed to represent it have been recognised, reproduced and framed by others. We work this through in a case study, allowing

the research to elucidate the production and framing of Swedish progressiveness by defence industry-related actors. In so doing, we can identify the intersections these actors create between Swedish progressiveness and security and thereby contribute to the nation branding and security studies literature by tracing how public and private actors frame and commodify symbolic notions of the ‘national’ for selling and justifying arms industry products and services.

Analytical approach: progressiveness as frame

Framing theory and frame analyses are associated with the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) and have long been used within communications and public opinion research, as well as in research on organisations, public policy and social movements, but increasingly also in International Relations and foreign policy research (Björnehed and Erikson, 2018; Payne, 2001; Snow et al., 2014; van Hulst and Yanow, 2016). Framing – that is, in its *active* form – is essentially about sense-making, and analyses often centre on (strategic) communication (e.g. news coverage or policy documents) and how issues and events are linked to shared metaphors, symbols, norms and narratives to create meaning or to mobilise support. As Entman (1993) writes:

To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described (p. 52, italics in original)

Frames – as expressed in speech, text, or images – thus seek to impose a certain logic or interpretation on an audience and define the terms of understanding an issue. Frames may shape public opinion and influence policymaking, and they may ‘legitimate certain decisions and activate certain issues, actors and special types of knowledge’ (Morth, 2000: 173–174). To study frames and framing is, as Creed et al. (2002) observe,

a technique for approaching a text by attending to its diverse idea elements with the following question: What holds these elements together? The goal of frame analysis is understanding how certain idea elements are linked together into packages of meaning, potentially encoded into soundbite-like signifiers that stand for those packages of meaning, and deployed in situated discursive activity (p. 37).

The text (or image) ‘contains frames, which are manifested by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgements’ (Entman, 1993: 52). *Framing*, the verb form of the concept, ‘denotes an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction’ (Benford and Snow, 2000: 614). It is active, Benford and Snow (2000) continue, ‘in that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic, evolving process’ (p. 614).

For our investigation, we are interested in identifying how defence-related actors strategically frame security issues in relation to Swedish progressiveness. The latter serves

as an overarching narrative or frame that shapes specific interpretations and descriptions of security problems and prescribes particular solutions or actions (De Vreese and Kandyła, 2009; Rein and Schon, 1996). In the analysis, we will identify recurrent tropes, symbols, keywords and references that link security issues to aspects of Swedish progressiveness.

We acknowledge that actors in the Swedish security sphere have different goals and address different audiences – domestic and international. Political (and military) elites may frame issues or problems in a certain way to influence public opinion or to help build international credibility and legitimacy for Swedish security policies. By contrast, security market actors may (seek to) frame issues and problems in specific ways to sell products or services while building legitimacy among key partners or publics (including political and military elites) by associating themselves with notions of ‘Swedish’ norms and ideals. Strategies, goals and intended audiences vary between actors and sectors, as do key tropes and ideas. Consequently, providing answers to our overarching question is not straightforward because these circumstances cannot be formulated in one specific way across all phases, settings or moments in time. Any study of this issue should be able to account for nuance about what counts when and should be open to conceding that many frames account for specific patterns of activity.

As Desrosiers (2012) points out, ‘[n]either framers or publics are naïve or gullible in the process [of framing]. Framers are generally aware that they must cater to their public to be successful’ (pp. 4–5). There is thus an interaction between framers and their respective publics. Framers may seek to *align* the public’s pre-existing expectations, ideas and perceptions with their views and goals (Desrosiers, 2012: 5). Framing efforts are not necessarily successful, and several frames may exist and compete within political systems or organisations. For instance, Morth (2000) points to several competing sense-making processes within the European Commission’s framing of the defence industry. Relatedly, Joachim and Schneiker (2012) show how private military and security companies in their communications seek to build legitimacy and create an identity by framing their work as ‘humanitarian’ and thus aligning or allying themselves with established actors such as humanitarian nongovernmental organisations. Finally, Wikman (2021) shows how the controversial issue of Swedish troop contributions to Afghanistan was framed and legitimised domestically through alignment with established ideas about consensus and continuity in Swedish foreign policy.

In the subsequent analysis, we investigate how defence industry actors align with Swedish nation branding narratives. We do so more specifically by focusing our analysis on the umbrella organisation and marketing platform called ‘Team Sweden’. Team Sweden mobilises public and private defence industry actors and is responsible for arms export promotion activities and for supporting and facilitating arms trade negotiations. They thereby play an active role as framers. Actors include representatives of the government, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the government agency for arms procurement (FMV), the Swedish Institute, an export organisation (Business Sweden, previously *Exportrådet*), a lobby group called the Swedish Security & Defence Industry Association (SOFF) and their member companies, including Saab most notably.⁷ Indeed, Saab stands out in being not only the by far largest Swedish security and defence company (SIPRI, 2022) but also the arms trade actor around whom most export promotion campaigns are organised. For

our empirical analysis, we draw on semi-structured interviews with these actors associated with Team Sweden, observations of their professional environments, and visual and written information on their websites and in their marketing material.

This diverse body of empirical material enables us to analyse and gain an understanding of the kind of tropes, symbols and larger messages the Swedish arms industry transmits and reproduces.⁸ We analyse in particular how Team Sweden actors relate to and mobilise key aspects of the ‘Swedish progressiveness’ frame. Such frame alignment, we argue, is a way for industry actors to mobilise support for or legitimise their policies, products and services in the eyes of key audiences – be they prospective clients or the wider public. The analysis will contribute to understanding how defence actors strategically employ aspects of nation brands and how such narratives become entangled as state and non-state actors seek to promote specific ideas and interests.

Branding ‘progressive’ security

For the following investigation, the empirical material discussed above was analysed to understand how ‘Swedish progressiveness’ has been framed and drawn upon by state and non-state actors for purposes of branding the arms industry in recent years. When reading and observing the body of material and using progressiveness as the master frame, three ‘idea elements’ (Creed et al., 2002: 37), or subthemes, emerged: (a) innovation and technological edge, (b) humanitarianism and political impartiality and (c) transparency and arms regulation. These subthemes were not conceptually predetermined but emerged from substantial empirical observation. Hence, they are not ‘concepts’ that we ‘theoretically problematised’ or ‘analytically operationalised’ and deductively applied to our data but instead were generated through an iterative process that formed sets or categories of abstract information related to our master frame of progressiveness.

Innovation and technology

The framing of Sweden’s industry as progressive in the sense of being uniquely innovative and technologically advanced can be frequently observed through the practice of arms export promotion. Such practices involve actors who, through various communication and visual strategies and social activities, help ‘package’ and present certain companies in ways that make them seem appealing to foreign buyers interested in Swedish armaments.

Since the mid-2010s, Swedish arms export promotion activities are undertaken by a coalition of actors under the label of Team Sweden, including, as noted above, both government and agency spokespersons and private actors like lobby groups and Saab representatives. Using Team Sweden as their main platform for organising export promotion activities abroad, Swedish arms are now marketed in an increasingly concerted manner and by explicitly utilising the Swedish nation brand (Larsson, 2020).

Team Sweden representatives openly admit to using their industry’s technological edge, width, and comprehensiveness as a specific selling point when promoting companies abroad. They consider Sweden ‘an international giant’ in terms of its level of innovation in defence and security and, therefore, seek to actively associate this form of progressiveness with the brand name of Sweden (Larsson, 2020: 38). More concretely,

the Team Sweden group have, in recent years, been showcasing the industry at major international trade fairs for security and defence. They frequently organise so-called ‘country pavilions’ at exhibitions such as Eurosatory in France, the Defence and Security Equipment International (DSEi) in the United Kingdom, the Latin America Aerospace and Defence conference (LAAD) in Brazil, and the International Defence Industry Exhibition (*Międzynarodowy Salon Przemysłu Obronnego*, MSPO) in Poland (SOFF, 2017, 2022, 2023). The pavilions usually include several small and medium-sized companies that are strategically selected based on pre-mapped business opportunities in the host country. Present in the pavilions is also local embassy staff and Business Sweden representatives. The pavilions are often designed as hubs with a meeting room in the centre of the space, surrounded by smaller booths where companies put their products on display. The pavilions tend to be distinctively ‘Swedish-looking’, with a yellow and blue colour scheme throughout and a visible Swedish flag,⁹ as well as the ‘three crowns’ national symbol.¹⁰

Team Sweden usually place their pavilions next to Saab’s large exhibition space in the expo halls (Business Sweden, 2016; DSEi, 2019). This creates the impression of the Swedish industry as a ‘one-stop-shop’ of innovations, offering a broad range of everything from Saab’s advanced weapons systems and fighter jets to the smaller firms’ cybersecurity software, logistical solutions, sensors, cameras, rifle sights and so on. Saab’s neighbouring booth also contributes to the industry’s overall framing of Swedishness. Saab’s imagery and screens often display their products in typical Scandinavian environments like vast archipelagos or snow-covered mountain ranges. In fact, emphasising Sweden’s ‘tough’ climate is an oft-used marketing trope by the company, as they tend to highlight how cold weather and complex coastal waters are ‘no match’ for Saab’s particularly rugged products and systems.¹¹

Another telling detail about Team Sweden’s branding strategies is found in the invitation letter to participate in the 2016 iteration of the MSPO trade show in Poland (Business Sweden, 2016). Showing a draft design of the abovementioned country pavilion, an image of the famous Swedish children’s book character ‘Pippi Longstocking’ is displayed on the wall in one of the booths. This is arguably not a random detail but a rather revealing one, reflecting Team Sweden’s self-image and belief in its arms industry as technologically capable, despite its relatively minor size, as ‘small but strong’.

The point above was particularly evident when Saab’s Chief Marketing Officer, Dean Rosenfield, recently spoke of Sweden’s advantages and strengths for doing business in India (a country which Saab, and the Swedish government, have earmarked for substantial future arms deals). Asked how Sweden distinguishes itself from the United States, Israel, Russia and France when doing business in India, Rosenfield replied:

There are certain advantages in terms of the culture, which is resonant here in Sweden. It is largely about innovation. It’s a very forward-leaning culture in terms of knowledge transfer. One of the reasons why we have been able to expand around the globe as a relatively small defence company is through the transfer of knowledge. From a Swedish perspective, we offer far more options than other nations. We are also far more agile than other nations (Saab, 2021).

From the examples provided, it is evident that the Swedish arms industry’s emphasis on technological edge and innovation is central to the processes of framing Swedish

progressiveness. It should be noted, however, that this modernist form of progressiveness is not unique to Sweden – virtually all significant arms-exporting states draw on such tropes in one way or another (Coetzee, 2017: 57). But as a US government security advisor in Washington DC (when asked about Sweden’s advantage in arms trade marketing) once observed, ‘Sweden has become very good at using its national and technological image to sell weapons, probably better than anyone else. Their success lies very much in the fact that buying nations usually assume that they are the good guys’ (personal communication, February 2015). Being perceived as ‘doing good and being good’ is, of course, a useful branding asset for arms trade actors (Coetzee, 2021), and in the case of the Swedish industry, we see how this entails using both the modernist notion of progressiveness discussed above as well as moralist forms of progressiveness, which we will turn to below.

Humanitarianism and impartiality

Sweden’s reputation as progressive in the sense of being a prominent humanitarian actor and foreign aid-giver stands strong, despite the apparent tensions between international development and arms trade. In 2014, the Swedish government declared its ‘feminist foreign policy’, explaining that it is rooted in the country’s long history of promoting gender equality and human rights nationally and internationally as well as in the UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. When asked whether this policy is compatible with the government’s equally long tradition of manufacturing and selling arms, the then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, replied that the government apparently saw no conflictual relation between the two matters (Reuterskiöld, 2018).

This assumed disconnection between the arms trade and its violent effects is a common pattern in how the industry frames itself, enabling companies and lobbyists to use the humanitarian imaginary for marketing purposes. In 2012, the Swedish Trade Council (2012, *Exportrådet*, later reorganised into Business Sweden) presented the results of a mapping of Sweden’s security market ‘with regard to companies, products and services, trends, prioritizations, trade barriers, needs and success factors’ for increased export. Regarding the latter, they found that the country ‘has a good reputation [and] nation-brand’, that its industry is ‘regarded as trustworthy’, and that ‘quality awareness is high’. Moreover, they write that the country’s ‘respect for human rights and [. . .] relative neutrality makes it easier to work in an international environment’. Hence, the tradition of humanitarian action and international aid, specifically its connection to Sweden’s history of non-alignment, is seen as a unique trope and a potential commercial success factor. Or, as expressed by Business Sweden’s head of security and defence exports more recently (before Sweden’s NATO application), Sweden as an arms trade partner is supposedly open to and capable of partnering up with anyone since it is ‘not too close to the Americans, not a post-Soviet state’ (Larsson, 2020: 39).

Concerning individual companies, the framing is essentially the same. Saab’s (2018) abovementioned corporate ‘vision’ – that ‘it is a human right to feel safe’ – has become firmly established within the company in recent years. This message is conveyed across their website, on LED screens all over their Stockholm headquarter foyer, and in their

information folders and brochures. In addition to being far-fetched ('feeling safe' is notably not among the UN articles of human rights), the message creates a paradoxical discursive effect by which Saab – Sweden's largest supplier of arms by some distance (SIPRI, 2022) – attempts to reconfigure their core activity as one of supplying human rights and associate themselves with notions of humanitarianism more broadly. As Berenike Prem (2018) writes, this kind of corporate framing is an example of how arms industries and private security actors are 'actively seeking to influence public perceptions about what or who they "really" are' as an attempt to vindicate their reputation 'by purveying a feel-good image as "new humanitarians"' (p. 52).

Relatedly, in the already cited brochure, Saab (2018) writes that the company values 'staying impartial'. Making a nod to Sweden's long history of non-alignment, they suggest that there is 'no conflict between being politically impartial and engaging in close international industrial and commercial partnerships'; rather, or perhaps even because of this, they 'know how to partner' (Saab, 2018). This part of the marketing material arguably reflects the government's 'dual' foreign policy stance developed since the end of the Cold War, after which they have sought to strike a balance between maintaining its historical reputation of neutrality while simultaneously striving to emerge as a reliable partner for political and economic cooperation in an increasingly globalised world.

In sum, various tropes and qualities associated with humanitarianism, political impartiality and neutrality, and international cooperation have all been carefully combined as part of the industry's branding efforts in recent years in ways that make the industry 'look good' rather than create tensions with the violent effects of the arms trade.

Regulation and transparency

The framing of Sweden's security industry as progressive in the sense of being transparent and well-regulated can be seen in how key stakeholders use Sweden's comparatively strict arms export law as a form of marketing and unique selling point. The message conveyed by industry representatives is that if you buy weapons from Sweden, it is at least going to be 'by the book'.

For instance, the lobby group SOFF presents strict export controls not as an obstacle to arms trade but rather as a strength and a reason for foreign governments to invest in and trust the Swedish industry. They write that 'contrary to what people may think, success on the export market and a meticulous export regulation go hand in hand' (SOFF, 2014: (our translation)). By this, they mean that the more careful Sweden's regulatory framework is – at least on article – the more likely it is that companies like Saab will be able to enter high-profile, lucrative, and strategically important markets like the ones in the United States and United Kingdom.

One of the reasons that the Swedish arms export regulation is considered strict is because of the 'democracy criterium' introduced when the legal framework was updated in 2017 (Government of Sweden, 2015). This meant that the agency for regulating arms export permits, the Inspectorate of Strategic Products (ISP), must account for the buyer country's relative respect for democratic principles when assessing proposed deals involving Swedish firms. Politicians across parliament warmly welcomed this development, and former Minister for Justice Morgan Johansson and former Minister for Foreign

Aid Isabella Lövin were particularly pleased, saying in a press release that this update of ‘an already strict’ legal framework now made Swedish arms export ‘ethically defensible’ (Kante, 2017).

ISP indeed needs to make a note of buyers’ democratic status as a result of the revamped law. However, this is also the only thing the agency needs to do. The democracy criterium is not a *de facto* criterium in the sense that it could block arms deals if unfulfilled. Instead, ISP considers democracy status as only one of several factors weighed into a comprehensive assessment. Democracy status is, in other words, only a ‘conditional obstacle’ in practice,¹² since it is always weighed against another critical factor in the law, namely, ‘broad security and defence policy interests’. This creates a permanent loophole in the law: any export deal can be accepted as long as it contributes to Swedish military capacity and overall security.

This arbitrariness and legal loophole has, unsurprisingly, been recognised by the lobby organisation SOFF (2020), which established a working group to assist its member companies when writing export permit applications to the ISP, and specifically, how to justify and convincingly formulate how their proposed deal would strengthen Sweden’s ‘security and defence policy interests’.¹³ Hence, in practice, it seems that the ‘strictness’ of the Swedish arms export law is rather negotiable for the industry itself. Obstacles to export, of course, exist, but they are ultimately ‘conditional’, and there is insider knowledge and specific working routines in the industry for helping companies successfully circumvent some of them.

However, given how frequently the ‘strictness’ of the Swedish arms export law is mentioned publicly by representatives from the government, defence sector and arms industry, it becomes clear that the image of the legal framework itself is yet another component in the processes of framing Swedish progressiveness. To industry spokespersons, the ‘democracy criterium’ serves as a compelling and effective branding trope which resonates with and supposedly ethically safeguards the Swedish self-image as a moral power, humanitarian actor, and transparent business partner.

Indeed, one of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ representatives in the Team Sweden group has claimed that Sweden as a brand name signals ‘quality, transparency, and long-term relations’.¹⁴ Particularly, ‘transparency’ – in the sense that Sweden has nothing to hide – is reflected in how embassies are used as sites for facilitating business negotiations and how diplomats play an essential role in enabling arms trade opportunities. In practical terms, embassy staff and Business Sweden representatives actively assist arms firms, for example, by notifying them about upcoming procurement deals and mapping out local decision-makers. Embassies also organise business meetings, including pitch seminars where certain Swedish companies meet host country officials responsible for military procurement (Larsson, 2020).

Hence, it is not by coincidence that a product such as the Swedish-designed Gripen fighter aircraft is on open display at some Swedish embassies (Coetzee, 2018). Cooperation between embassies and Saab is, in fact, somewhat of an organised practice. For instance, a Team Sweden-led trade delegation, including representatives from the government and Saab, travelled to Manila in 2016 to enhance business opportunities in the Philippines. The trip was openly framed as having dual purposes, serving both state and non-state interests, as the delegation attended the inauguration of the new Swedish

embassy and then the opening of a new Saab sales office the day after. Saab (2016) stated that key future business opportunities in the Philippines ‘include the Gripen fighter [jet]’ and ‘naval combat systems’, and that the ‘new office in Manila is to be the hub for a long-term relationship as a supplier of products and services to the Philippines Armed Forces’. Whereas Team Sweden framed the intermingling of diplomatic affairs and private interests as a strength and a matter of transparency, as a chance to create the appearance of a united front and thereby increase business opportunities for Saab, the media and civil society were far more sceptical. Reports highlighted the Philippines’ increasingly authoritarian regime and how problematic it was for state representatives to promote arms trade with a president such as Rodrigo Duterte (Forssblad and Mannheimer, 2016; Resare, 2016)

Conclusions

The case of Sweden is a striking example where defence industry-related actors (both public and private) strategically frame a ‘progressive’ place or nation brand to sell and legitimise security products and services despite the negative images, discourses and consequences often associated with such matters. These findings speak to contemporary research on security branding and Nordic branding and contribute to that literature by analysing the less explored inverse relationship between how peaceful and ‘progressive’ places use their image to sell security. Our study detailed how state and non-state defence industry-related actors frame loosely configured narratives of ‘progressiveness’ as a key trope of Swedishness to extract profits from its circulation and consumption. To that end, we examined innovation and technological edge, humanitarianism and political impartiality, and transparency and arms regulation to understand better how ‘progressiveness’ has been framed and drawn upon by these actors for purposes of branding the arms industry in recent years.

Our findings show that despite some analytical and descriptive differences, the co-production of security branding between state and non-state actors is streamlined to a large extent. In other words, the messages are framed similarly, which is indicative of our guiding assumption: Sweden’s public and private security actors are two sides of the same coin, and their interests do not compete side by side or in a dichotomy but are fundamentally embedded. These practices are perhaps uncontroversial because states must increasingly employ new and diverse strategies to succeed in the ultra-competitive environment of the conventional arms trade. As Browning (2015) notes, in a globalised world, ‘it is no longer firms, but countries themselves which need to be made more competitive and attractive’ (p. 202). Hence, it seems that the state itself (and its political philosophy) needs to be sold as an attractive option for cooperating partners. In this context, we assert that branding progressive security is about status-seeking in the international hierarchy of arms-exporting states between the hypermodern and progressive and the rest. But how exclusive is this ‘Swedish model’ of security branding? One could argue, ‘not a lot, but also quite a bit’.

The social media stories and marketing strategies of the arms industry and the Swedish government are, in a sense, anachronistic because it relies on bombast to display, on one hand, visions of technological superiority and, on the other, almost Cold War narratives

of fear and defence. However, the latter is also combined with nostalgia of ‘good old neutral Sweden’. Considering the deteriorating security situation in Europe, future research should consider how Sweden’s NATO application will influence the branding of its security products and services. More comparative work is also needed regarding the security branding of so-called ‘progressive’ countries. What would be of particular interest in future analyses is whether so-called ‘moral arms exporters’ – such as Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands – exhibit similarities in dealing with the difficult question of short-term commercial and political gains vis-à-vis longer-term foreign policy goals precisely because arms trade is intimately linked to broader issues of peace and development. These countries are all mature liberal democracies with relatively large but extremely advanced weapons export industries which have cultivated a self-image as international humanitarians and are characterised by a neo-corporatist political culture. After all, state structures and features matter because the type of state provides a framework of action for the actors and their incentives. The generalisation to be derived from comparative investigations into countries such as Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands could be how political processes connected to collective bargaining and ‘similar’ internal elite coalitions play a role in security branding.

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Notes

1. Saab AB (founded in 1937 as ‘SAAB’, Svenska Aeroplan Aktiebolag) is Sweden’s largest defence company.
2. The Nordic countries refer to Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.
3. The historical tradition of military non-alignment was effectively broken in May of 2022, when the Swedish government and Finland applied for NATO membership following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine earlier that year.
4. See Coetzee and Berndtsson (2023) for an extensive discussion of how security actors in Sweden are historically connected. Their study maps the interdependencies between public and private actors and provides a history of the Swedish arms industry (its roots in total defence and non-alignment policies, leading to strong and autonomous domestic R&D and manufacturing, and the need to export).
5. <https://theworld.org/stories/2014-05-23/peace-loving-sweden-and-switzerland-are-among-top-arms-exporters-capita-world>.
6. Sweden’s nation branding strategy has claimed international success to some degree. The so-called ‘Reputation Institute’ which assesses ‘perceptions of the most progressive social and

economic policies' as well as countries' 'aesthetic-beauty' and 'feel-good factor' crowned Sweden as 'the most reputable country in the world' in 2018. The institute claims that 'the more you can integrate around a common theme [and] backstory on what your country stands for, the more effective the message, and ultimately the more powerfully that will be translated into your reputation'. See: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/06/22/most-reputable-countries-swedenunited-states/722664002/>.

7. In 2015, arms export promotion and marketing responsibilities were transferred from the Swedish Defence and Security Export Agency (FXM) to a plethora of public and private actors under the umbrella of Team Sweden. See Lundmark and Oxenstierna (2016) *Koordinering och Prioritering av internationella samarbeten inom materiel- och logistikområdet*. Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut (FOI), 52, FOI-R-4388-SE. See also: https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/de597ecc23644aec88b5566f1594acf7/team_sweden_folder_eng.pdf.
8. Due to the scope of our analysis, the empirical material is focused on statements, texts, and imagery that inform us about the 'outward' image and message conveyed by Swedish defence industry actors. Hence, it does not provide us much detail about more 'internal' processes, or for that matter, how branding attempts are 'received' by different audiences, for example, during arms trade negotiations.
9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ij5RZXs6B5c> [at 3:03–47].
10. <https://soff.se/2017/09/06/mot-team-sweden-pa-dsei-12-15-september/>.
11. See for instance <https://www.saab.com/newsroom/stories/2016/october/designed-for-the-most-challenging-environments> and <https://www.saab.com/newsroom/stories/2020/april/cold-climate-test-harsh-weather-no-match-for-gripen-e>.
12. <https://forsvarsexport.se/export/exporterar-sverige-till-diktaturer/> [in Swedish].
13. Adding to the export law's weaknesses is the fact that the ISP does not assess so-called 'follow-up deliveries' (*följdleveranser*). This means that if an export permit was granted pre-2017 to a country that would not pass the new law's democracy criterium, the company's follow-up shipments of the same weapon system(s) (including updated versions) could still proceed unaffected. This is precisely the situation with Saab's continued sales of the GlobalEye radar aeroplane to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in recent years – countries who not only lack respect for basic democratic principles and fundamental human rights but who are also at war with Yemen, see, for example, Svahn (2019) *Rapport: Svensk radar används i Jemenkriget*. *Svenska Dagbladet*, 15 April 2019, Halkjaer (2021) *Fördubblad svensk vapenexport till krigförande länder i Jemen*. *Omvärlden*.
14. Interview, November 2017.

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