

Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström

Statement of Government Policy

in the Parliamentary Debate on Foreign Affairs
Wednesday 14 February 2024



Mr/Madam Speaker,

Our closest neighbours are in the Nordic and Baltic regions and along the southern shores of the Baltic Sea. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain and advent of democracy, we have forged even tighter bonds with each other.

We are among one another's closest partners, and together we represent a significant political and economic force.

The Government prioritises these relations.

This year, Sweden holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, the institution for broad cooperation between the Nordic governments. In this context, we are guided by the vision of the Nordic region being the world's most integrated and sustainable region by 2030.

We are also coordinating the work of the N5 and the NB8, which bring together the Nordic and Nordic-Baltic countries in informal cooperation formats focused on foreign and security policy.

We want to consolidate and strengthen these formats during the year, which is a necessity in these new, serious times.

Our main priority will naturally be support to Ukraine, in which all the Nordic and Baltic countries are deeply engaged.

Soon all the countries around the Baltic Sea except for Russia will be members of NATO, which will allow for even deeper dialogue and cooperation.

Together with my Finnish counterpart, I have initiated a discussion on how best to harness these opportunities.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Just a short distance from our Nordic-Baltic region, a war is raging where a democratic state has been attacked by an authoritarian one.

We will soon enter the third year of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine.

The courage that the Ukrainian people have mustered to face the aggression instils the utmost respect. We are reminded that if we want to live in freedom and democracy, we must be prepared to defend these values. The Government considers support to Ukraine in the coming years to be our foremost foreign policy task.

Sweden will continue to provide political, humanitarian, military and financial support to Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Sweden's support to Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion totals around SEK 30 billion. Eighty per cent of that

support to Ukraine has been provided since this Government took office in 2022.

The Government has already approved 14 military support packages and adopted a comprehensive strategy for reconstruction and reform cooperation with Ukraine. The Government is preparing new military and civilian aid packages. Ukraine's cause is our cause.

The Government has also pushed for strong and long-term support through the EU.

Recently, a historic agreement was reached on financial support to Ukraine totalling EUR 50 billion. This sends a signal not only to Ukraine, but also to our international partners.

Let me make it clear that the Government remains unwavering in its support for Ukraine – indeed, we are firmly committed.

Sweden's support will continue for as long as necessary.

Russia will remain a serious threat to Sweden's security for the foreseeable future. It is therefore in our interests that Russia's strategic scope for action be restricted – militarily, economically and politically.

Sweden is pushing for tougher sanctions against Russia. So far, the EU has adopted twelve sanctions packages. Efforts within the EU to counter circumvention of sanctions must be stepped up.

Sweden welcomes the fact that the EU has now laid the foundations to allow the use of frozen Russian assets to support Ukraine, as initiated by Sweden during its Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Sweden is working to ensure accountability for Russia's aggression against Ukraine and for violations of international law committed in connection with the war.

We are also seeing gross and serious violations of human rights and freedoms in Belarus, where close to 1 400 political prisoners are currently being held.

Sweden is pushing for additional sanctions against the Belarusian regime on account of both the repression in the country and its participation in Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

In the coming months, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs will hold a conference focusing on developments in Belarus. This is one more way to strengthen the dialogue with the democratic forces in exile.

The Government supports the Belarusian people on their path to a free and democratic Belarus that is a member of the European family.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has created momentum for EU enlargement. Sweden welcomes the decision to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.

Sweden has worked for this decision, which is recognition of those countries' extensive reform efforts. We will continue to support them in building closer ties with the EU. Their future lies in the EU.

EU enlargement is a geostrategic investment in peace, democracy, security, stability and prosperity. It is in our interests to help the candidate countries to move closer to the Union.

Sweden supports an approach of gradual integration. It is important that this approach is designed to provide support on the road to EU membership, not to be a substitute for it.

Membership negotiations are based on the candidate countries' merits and on the implementation of necessary reforms, not least with regard to the rule of law and democracy.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

The EU is a community of values and Sweden's most important foreign policy platform.

Elections to the European Parliament will be held in June and then a new Commission will be appointed. A strong and united EU gives Europe power and gives Sweden a voice on global issues.

In its response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU has demonstrated its strong will and ability to take united and strategic action. Preserving peace and freedom on our continent are the very core of the Union.

The EU has consolidated its role as a foreign, security and defence policy actor, which the Government has advocated.

Stronger competitiveness is a prerequisite for the EU's capacity to respond to security threats. Through business, trade and innovation, we strengthen the EU's geopolitical influence. That is why the Government initiated a new long-term competitiveness strategy during Sweden's Presidency of the Council.

There is a need to protect strategic interests within the EU. This must take place in a way that restricts the negative effects on the single market as far as possible.

The Trade and Technology Council (TTC) is an increasingly important platform for transatlantic cooperation on strategic foresight.

Sweden wants to see deeper relations between the EU and the United Kingdom. It is also positive that the EU is developing its relations with other key actors. The EU institutions have presented proposals on re-engagement with Türkiye.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Sweden is ready to join NATO – the defence community of Western democracies – as a full member.

Ultimately, the aim of NATO cooperation is to safeguard the Allies' freedom and security.

With Sweden in NATO, Sweden will be safer and NATO will be stronger.

We welcome the fact that Türkiye has completed its ratification process and expect Hungary to soon do the same.

Sweden will be a reliable, loyal and engaged NATO Ally.

We will take on considerable responsibility in our neighbourhood and contribute to the security of all Allies via NATO's 360-degree approach and deterrence and defence posture.

Sweden's defence spending will exceed two per cent of GDP this year, and continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Sweden is continuing its engagement in arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, including by taking an active part in the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

The transatlantic link is indispensable for Sweden's and Europe's security, but must never be taken for granted.

The bilateral defence cooperation agreement with the United States is strategically significant and is a milestone in relations between our countries.

It is fundamentally important that Sweden maintains and deepens its security and economic relations with the United States. Canada and the United Kingdom are also important partners.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

The Government's foremost task is safeguarding the freedom, safety and security of all Swedes, in Sweden and abroad. The threats to Sweden are increasingly complex.

Information influence campaigns aiming to harm Sweden have tangible democratic, economic, security and foreign policy consequences.

The Government has been working for some time to prevent and avert the spread of disinformation and to strengthen the image of Sweden.

Over the past year, we have also handled a number of consular crises, including the evacuation from Sudan and the still ongoing efforts to provide support to Swedes in distress as a result of the developments in the Middle East.

The Government will continue the efforts to secure the release of journalist Dawit Isaak and publisher and poet Gui Minhai. At the same time, the Government is working intensively on other consular cases involving detained Swedish citizens, including that of EU official Johan Floderus.

The Government demands that they all be released.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Since October, a new and serious situation has been developing in the Middle East. Sweden supports Israel's legitimate right to defend itself against Hamas in compliance with international law and international humanitarian law. All hostages must be released immediately and unconditionally.

In light of the catastrophic situation in Gaza, the Government considers that a humanitarian ceasefire is necessary.

Sweden is a major donor of core support to several of the humanitarian actors on the ground. Since the start of the war, we have contributed more than SEK 250 million in additional humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza. Swedish aid funding must be used effectively and contribute to promoting the conditions for a two-state solution, and be channelled through actors that do not directly or indirectly provide support to Hamas, terrorism or antisemitism.

Sweden and the EU see no peaceful way forward other than a negotiated two-state solution, with Israel and Palestine co-existing in peace and security. We have historically very close ties with Israel, which this Government has rebuilt, and we have well-developed relations with Palestine. Sweden's engagement in the region and in Israel will increase further over time.

Sweden has clear expectations that the Palestinian Authority will condemn Hamas and take measures against corruption. Israel's right to statehood is indisputable.

Israel must address the unacceptable violence by settlers in the West Bank and cease the expansion of settlements. The Government supports the ongoing work in the EU to propose sanctions against extremist settlers.

Avoiding regional escalation is of huge importance. The Government supports efforts to maintain security, trade and freedom of navigation in and around the Red Sea. Sweden welcomes the EU's decision to launch Operation Aspides to contribute to these efforts.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

It is crucial for Sweden's security and for stability in our neighbourhood that the rules-based world order, international law and respect for the Charter of the United Nations are maintained.

Human rights and freedoms must be defended. The equal value of every individual, regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation or religion is a matter of freedom. A number of religious minority groups around the world, including Christians and Uyghurs, are subjected to oppression.

It is worrying when these rules are undermined by authoritarian states such as Russia, China and Iran, which seek to reshape them based on their value systems.

Iran's nuclear technology activities, its destabilising role in the Middle East and its military cooperation with Russia also give cause for concern.

The UN continues to play a central role in work on global issues. The Government will continue to pursue Swedish foreign policy interests in our engagement within the UN.

The Government is raising its foreign policy ambitions on cyber and digital issues. A special envoy for international cyber affairs has been appointed.

Sweden is a leading space nation and will actively pursue space diplomacy.

The Esrange Space Centre contributes to our own research, innovation and security, and those of our partners. It is a strategic resource that strengthens NATO's and the EU's access to space.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Gender equality is a core value in Sweden's foreign policy. We see that global opposition to gender equality is on the rise. In countries

such as Afghanistan and Iran, authoritarian rule is based on comprehensive and systematic oppression of women. Sweden can never accept this. But we also see it in Europe, not least in the form of systematic sexual violence in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

We are working in both foreign and development assistance policy to reverse this trend.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Protectionist currents have increased in global politics.

Sweden's position as an export-dependent country means that it is important to safeguard free, sustainable and rules-based trade and an effective EU internal market. These contribute to our competitiveness and resilience.

The Government has presented a new foreign trade strategy.

Sweden's competitiveness must be strengthened and the conditions for trade, investments and innovation improved.

Sweden's global position as a prioritised partner for green and digital transition must be reinforced. Swedish companies are strongly committed to sustainability, gender equality and corporate social responsibility.

In the last year, the EU concluded a free trade agreement with New Zealand. The Government will continue to work proactively for more free trade agreements to be negotiated.

The countries of the Indo-Pacific region are important partners in both trade policy and foreign and security policy.

We are deepening our relations with global partners in Africa and Latin America. There is considerable potential for enhanced cooperation on technology and trade and also on broader foreign policy issues.

China is the world's second-largest economy and a technology leader; at the same time, the country remains under authoritarian rule and has growing global ambitions. China's conduct towards Taiwan is worrying, and threats of military violence are unacceptable. Sweden's relations with China must be anchored in a European strategy and in close transatlantic cooperation. Important steps in this direction were taken during our Presidency of the Council of the EU.

We welcome dialogue and cooperation with China where this is possible and in line with our interests and values, for example to promote trade on equal terms and to tackle climate change.

In parallel with this, we continue, along with the rest of the EU, to draw attention to human rights violations.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

Swedish development assistance should create opportunities for better living conditions for people living in poverty and oppression. Countries that develop in freedom give their people belief in the future.

Swedish development assistance policy is being modernised through the new reform agenda. At the same time, development cooperation is one of the most important foreign policy tools for tackling the challenges that Sweden and the world are facing. In this way, we are also protecting Swedish interests.

Market economies, investment, trade and education are crucial to lifting people out of poverty through the participation of developing countries in the global economy.

Our broad commitment to global health remains unchanged. Investment in health is important for the development of both individuals and communities. Sweden will work in particular for the enjoyment by all of rights that are politically sensitive in other countries, such as sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Development cooperation plays an important role in efforts to counter the democratic backsliding in many parts of the world.

Sweden is a strong voice and actor for gender equality and human rights and freedoms. Open, democratic societies are a prerequisite for creating and guaranteeing peace and freedom.

Development assistance will contribute to preventing the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement, and to creating favourable conditions for sustainable reintegration.

Sweden remains one of the world's largest humanitarian donors. We are expanding our climate aid and making it more effective, and Swedish aid will contribute to accelerating the green transition.

We are also strengthening women's and girls' freedom, rights and empowerment and countering restrictive practices and norms.

Civil society organisations are indispensable partners in all of these efforts.

Mr/Madam Speaker,

The Government's foreign policy rests on European, Nordic–Baltic and transatlantic foundations.

With a war in Europe, our neighbourhood is inevitably our top foreign policy priority. But our foreign policy will always have an important global dimension.

We are strengthening cooperation in the EU. I hope to soon return to the Riksdag to outline our policy as a full member of NATO. Our role as chair of the various Nordic and Nordic-Baltic cooperation formats is a priority.

The challenges we face are complex and difficult. We need our friends. And we need global dialogue.

We are also strongest when we are united in the Riksdag. I welcome the cooperation we have already had, not least on the most important issue – support to Ukraine.