



Geostrategic aircraft carrier: Gotland's role in NATO's eastern flank



Jonas Pfeufer [in](#)

Jonas is interested in challenging environments where he can learn and expand his knowledge about global politics. His main academic interest lies in German and European Foreign and Security Policy. He is also very interested in the Politics of European Migration. He moreover worked on projects focussing on Germany's Role in the EU and Energy Security.



Marijn Johannes Leo Rijk [in](#)

Marijn is a driven 3rd year International Public Policy student from the Hague. Formerly he was a youth representative for The Dutch National police. Currently he is most active in the participation system of his home university.

Introduction

"He who sits in Gotland controls large parts of the Baltic Sea." (O'Connor et al., 2022, p.1)

This quote by Rutger Banholtz, former head of the Swedish Home Guard, captures the significance of the island of Gotland. Continuing to emphasise the importance of Gotland, he added:

„Gotland is an aircraft carrier“ (O'Connor et al. 2022, p.1).

Gotland has always been militarily contested. In the past, Gotland already saw combat during the Viking age. More significantly, perhaps, Tsarist Russia occupied Gotland for a century in 1808. Sweden withdrew its troops after the collapse of the Soviet Union but redeployed them in 2018 in order to combat potential Russian aggression.

The small island with only 60.000 inhabitants gained new significance when Russia invaded Ukraine in February of 2022. The Invasion has caused Sweden and Finland to rethink their long-standing opposition to NATO membership. Today, 28 out of 30 NATO Members have given their support for Swedish Membership, only the approval of Hungary is missing for various reasons that go beyond the scope of this paper to analysis.

Since Sweden will likely constitute the next NATO Enlargement, the focus of this is on Gotland and its geostrategic importance. Discussions on the importance of islands are ongoing. Literature is rarely available. In order to make findings on the geostrategic importance of islands, the research question defines itself as: „Do Islands work as deterrents in conflicts?“. The findings in the case of Gotland will be used to make generalised points about the use of islands as factors of

deterrence. To answer the research question, the structure of this article is as follows: The article starts with the introduction, Chapter 1 provides a literature review on islands and regional security, Chapter 2 presents the hypothesis, and Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in this paper. Chapter 4 presents a short historical background, and Chapter 5 presents the analysis. Chapter 6 closes with a discussion.

2. Literature Review

2. A Rational Actor Model

The rational actor model is one of the best-known theories for explaining foreign policy approaches. Political scientist Alex Mintz (Mintz, 2010, p.64):

"The rational actor model is a linchpin of FPDM".

The model is particularly suitable for explaining the actions of states in times of crisis (Mingst, 2003). This theory assumes that utility maximisation is the goal of every state (Alden, 2017). This is based on a step sequence that proceeds as follows: A decision maker decides which goal to prioritise over other goals. Various options are then identified and analysed. After a cost-benefit analysis, in which the consequences are weighed up, the options are listed. The options that involve the most costs are at the bottom of the list. At the top are the options that involve the least costs. This is the option that is ultimately selected (Slantchev, 2005).

When actors evaluate the situation incorrectly, mistakes happen. This can lead to unintended consequences that are not anticipated by the actors. When uncertain decisions are made, an action can produce results with one probability or another. Uncertainty here

distinguishes between under-certainty due to the environment, in that there is little information about it and strategic uncertainty, which arises from the rational decisions of various actors (Slantchev, 2005). Individuals as well as are rational and pursue their own interests (Alden, 2017).

Rationality is at the core of many theories about the behaviour of states. This article considers states to be rational actors. The next chapter introduces deterrence theory, building on the assumption of rationality.

2. B Deterrence Theory

Lawrence Freedman defines Deterrence as: "concerned with deliberate attempts to manipulate the behaviour of others through conditional threats." (Beattie, 2010, P.19 quoted after Freedman, 2004, P.6).

The challenge of deterrence is about discouraging states from taking unwanted actions, especially military aggression (Mazarr, 2018). By definition, a state acts towards discouraging or restraining another state from taking an unwanted action, like an armed attack. It involves efforts to stop or prevent actions (Mazarr, 2018). In the literature on deterrence, it is distinguished between "Deterrence by denial" and "Deterrence by punishment".

Deterrence by denial works to make an action unlikely to succeed, denying a potential aggressor the confidence it needs to achieve its goals. At their extreme, a strategy like this can face an aggressor with the risk of extreme loss.

Deterrence by punishment threatens severe punishment such as nuclear escalation or economic punishment. An aggressor might also doubt the defenders willingness to impose certain punishments: "An aggressor might also convince itself that the defender will hesitate to

follow through on threats to punish because of attendant risks, such as further escalation, that the deterring state may not be willing to run once the moment arrives." (Mazarr, 2018). In this article we use Deterrence by punishment, mainly economic punishment, when referring to deterrence in general.

In order to achieve successful deterrence, there are three conditions to consider. Those are 1) Level of Aggressor Motivation, 2) Clarity About the Object of Deterrence and Actions the Defender Will Take and 3) Aggressor Must Be Confident that Deterring State Has Capability and Will to Carry Out Threats (Mazarr, 2018). These Conditions will be discussed down below.

1) Level of Aggressor Motivation: The Intentions of the aggressor are the beginning point for success or failure of success of an analysis of deterrence.

2) Clarity About the Object of Deterrence and Actions the Defender Will Take: The defender has to be as clear as possible about what it is trying to deter as well what it is going to do when the threat is ignored.

3) Aggressor Must Be Confident that Deterring State Has Capability and Will to Carry Out Threats: The potential aggressor has to believe that the defender has the capability and will do what it threatens (Mazarr, 2018).

3. Hypothesis

The hypotheses derive themselves from the theories that were discussed in the previous chapters.

Hypothesis H1:

Gotland has high strategic value and can act as deterrence.

Nullhypothesis H2:

Gotland has no strategic value and cannot work as deterrence.

4. Methodology

In order to make generalized findings on islands, we should establish why islands in general are of strategic importance:

1) Islands play important roles such as warning and surveillance posts,

2) Logistic bases for operations on the mainland and preventing intrusion from hostile ships.

3) Countries attach economic, cultural and geographical importance to islands as well as geostrategic aspects (Kazumine, 2013).

A Case Study is defined as an intensive study of a single unit that aims to generalize across a larger set of units (Gerring, 2004). This method is understood as a way to define cases, not to analyze them (Gerring, 2004). As Case Study can be defined as:

„an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units.“

A unit is a spatially described phenomenon, like a nation state, a revolution or an

election that are observed at a single point in time (Gerring, 2004).

A case study can provide a nuanced, empirically rich, holistic account of specific phenomena. The case study might be especially appropriate to for phenomena that simply less amenable to more superficial measures and tests as well those for which our reasons for understanding or explaining them as subjective (Willis, 2014).

5. Historical Background of Gotland

Gotland is Sweden's largest island, and it is strategically positioned in the Baltic Sea. The island lies just 300 km (186 miles) from the home of Russia's Baltic Fleet in the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad, sandwiched between Lithuania and Poland (O'Connor & Filks, 2022). The Swedish island has been inhabited since 7200 BC and consequently enjoys a rich medieval history, with Gotlands capital Visby at its heart. During these medieval days Visby rose to be the most important Hanseatic city on the Baltic sea (Academic accelerator, n.d.).



Strategic location of Gotland (Mapcreator, 2024)

Since Gotland was inhabited long before it gained this important Hanseatic position, it raises the question: inhabited by whom? After being subdued to Swedish rule in 1645 with the signing of the treaty of Bromsebro, Gotland was held by a plethora of peoples and nations (Academic accelerator, n.d.). These include, but are not limited to, viking cultures, the Danes (who fortified Visby), and the order of the Teutonic knights who invaded the island in 1398 (Academic accelerator, n.d.). This historical geopolitical interest the island carries, comes forth from the dependence of the surrounding nation states' access to the Baltic Sea.

Incursion:

A sudden and aggressive entry or invasion of a place or territory.

At the end of the previous century tensions rose around the regional role of Gotland in assuring access to the Baltic sea. This came to be due to an unprecedented increase of soviet submarine activity in the region. To be more precise, during the period of the first of January 1980, until first of January 1988 violations of Swedish territorial waters by soviet submarines increased from five violations to thirty or more violations in 1988 (McCormick, 1990). These Soviet provocations of the past, which took place along the entirety of the Swedish coast and Swedish restricted waters often led to major inconveniences for neutral Sweden. Sweden's neutral position, between the two global poles of the era in the case of the Russian submarines, was especially complicated in the light of these numerous soviet backed incidents (McCormick, 1990).

The fall of the Soviet Union in the early 90's did not bring an end to the cat and mouse game between the Swedish armed forces and the Russian submarines. The most recent known incursion by an unidentified submersible vessel (or vessels) took place in 2014. During the span of a week, public sightings of an unknown submersible vessel started to stream into the Swedish intelligence services. Despite these sightings, after a week of searching, the Swedish army had to abandon its search for its covert foe. The Swedish government, which is known for its transparency stated "We say with confidence that this is not a larger, conventional submarine" (Groll, 2014). This could indicate that the submarine similarly to its soviet predecessors was collecting intelligence on Swedish military operations and assets as occurred on a large scale in the late days of the Soviet Union (McCormick, 1990).

6. Analysis

Sweden and thus Gotland, receives special attention due to Sweden's upcoming NATO accession. Until recently, two countries were still in the way of Sweden's NATO membership. At the 2023 NATO Summit held in Vilnius, Lithuania last July, these two remaining countries: Hungary and Türkiye, both expressed their commitment to progress the approval of Sweden through their parliamentary sessions (NATO, 2024). Since then, Turkey has ratified the membership of Sweden. There is however an underlying motivation for Turkey's Ratification of Sweden, Turkey now expects The United States to begin working on securing the U.S. Congress' endorsement for a sale of \$20 billion worth of F-16 fighter jets to Turkey (Reuters, 2024). This leaves only Hungary standing in the way of Sweden's membership to the NATO alliance. It leads

one to think whether Hungary is also bargaining under the table, with Sweden's NATO accession as collateral? Since Hungary's ruling party Fidesz has a majority in the parliament the whole ordeal could seemingly be solved without any major obstacles in the way. The reason for Hungary's political will roots itself in dissatisfaction about Swedish criticism of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán over the perceived erosion of rule of law. Orbán denies such erosion. Unlike Turkey, Hungary does not have a list of demands, but says grievances need to be addressed before it can ratify Sweden's accession to NATO (Johnson et al., 2023). More recently Orbán also said he and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson have taken steps to "rebuild trust" between the two countries, without specifying what those steps were (Zimmermann, 2024).

6. A Security Challenges and Threats

The now apparent threat to Gotland is indicated by the development of soviet subma-

rine activity in the Gotland area which continued into the modern day and age with the 2014 incident described above. In contrast to the narrative of the Russian Federation, these subs are not merely lost or off track, but appear to be gathering intelligence on Swedish coasts similarly as happened in the past. Tension around Gotland is not limited to the nautical domain, the greatest aerial provocation came on March 29, 2013. Two Tupolev Tu-22M3 nuclear-capable bombers, escorted by four Sukhoi Su-27 jet fighters, came within 24 miles of Gotland, on dummy bombing runs aimed at the headquarters of Sweden's signals intelligence agency, and at a key military command bunker. Sweden's part-time air force, having been given the weekend off for the Easter holiday, was helpless; Gotland's air defenses were at this time not active (Lucas, 2023).

According to Karelis Neretneiks, A former Swedish Major general "If the Russians were to occupy parts of Sweden that would create some kind of ... 'wall' that NATO would have



Swedish Armed Forces and US Marines practise defending Gotland (Flickr, 2022)

to fight its way through before being able to help its Baltic members". He added that "With Sweden in NATO this 'wall' would more or less become a 'road' to help the Baltic States instead" (O'Connor & Filks, 2022). Geographically Gotland is at the frontier of this "road" to the Baltic States. The former American general of US Army forces in Europe described Gotland as a key location during his on-duty visit to the island in July 2017. Addressing the Swedish soldiers, he explained, "You have a strategically very important task here. I do not think there is any island anywhere that is more important." (Wieslander & Adamson, 2023).

6. B Defense Infrastructure and Capabilities

A recent resurgence of military activity on Gotland, and a strong will to conduct military exercises as a NATO partner and

| "Si vis pacem, para bellum"

future member puts actions behind the words of military decision-makers. Last year on April 17, a battalion of seven hundred US soldiers rolled over the Swedish border from Norway, marking the start of the largest Swedish military exercise in more than twenty-five years. This training operation, nicknamed "Aurora 2023", ran until May 11, 2023 and consisted of more than 26,000 soldiers from 14 countries (Wieslander & Adamson, 2023). Aurora took place across all domains and Swedish territory, but it had a particular focus on southern Sweden and the strategically important island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. In 2022 a previous mission with Gotland at the heart of its military exercise took place. This time by the name of "Baltops 2022". In

this particular exercise, Sweden's Gotland served as a training ground for several air insertions and amphibious landings which were conducted by the USS Kearsarge Amphibious Ready Group-22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit and Swedish counterparts (US.NAVY, 2022). At sea, ships fine-tuned tactical maneuvering, anti-submarine warfare, live-fire training, mine countermeasures operations, and replenishments at sea. BALTOPS 22 involved forces from 16 countries, with over 45 ships, more than 75 aircraft, and 7,500 personnel participating.

The exercise ended on 17 June 2022. The drill was led by the US Navy's Sixth Fleet, headquartered in Italy, with Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO (STRIKFORNA-TO), based in Portugal, implementing command and control of the exercise (NATO, 2022).

In the same year (2022) the Swedish government decided

to invest 1.6 billion Swedish Króna (approximately \$160 million) in strengthening military infrastructure on Gotland (Wieslander & Adamson, 2023). When it comes to the aforementioned air provocation, it is important to mention that air defences have been reactivated on Gotland. This was confirmed by a press release coming from the headquarters of the Swedish army. One of the aerial defence systems called "Launch System 23" was installed on Gotland around March 2021 (Försvarsmakten, 2021).

7. Conclusion

"Si vis pacem, para bellum"

In the case of the island of Gotland the seemingly paradoxical saying "Si vis pacem,

para bellum" meaning: "if you want peace, prepare for war" is a relevant source of wisdom. This Roman-era aphorism has come to mean that if confronted with an aggressive adversary, build your military strength so that the adversary knows that, if it launches an attack, it will receive a punishing response — and will therefore be discouraged from pursuing such an attack (Brookings, 2023). The strategy derived from the saying can also be called "deterrence", as was extensively discussed in the literature review earlier in this paper. Aspects of deterrence strategy can be said to heavily apply to Gotland, with the redeployment of troops on the island in 2018, reactivation of anti-aircraft systems in 2023 and not to forget: large-scale military exercises in collaboration with NATO. Due to these occurrences and Sweden's explicit strategy of deterrence on Gotland and beyond, Sweden can no longer be said to uphold its former neutrality policy. This further supports Sweden's motivation to become a full NATO member state.

This sort of deterrence development is not unusual in the area. The idea of achieving peace by preparing for war is something that an increasingly growing group of states in the direct vicinity of the Russian Federation adopted. One only has to look at the map and note that those member states who contribute to the agreed-upon NATO 2% of GDP guideline lie closer or neighbor with Russia. The 2% guideline can also be interpreted as an indicator of a country's political will to contribute to NATO's common defense efforts. Similar growth in defence spending particularly in the case of the island of Gotland, in accordance with the rational actor theory, saw a tremendous increase. This amount is the before mentioned 160 million, and is on its own a sign that rational actor Sweden em-places an enormous strategic value on the Island of Gotland "a geostrategic aircraft carrier".

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