Developments in Civil-Military Relations:
The Swedish Armed Forces Managing Legitimacy in a Post-Materialist Society

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Central State institutions in Western democracies are increasingly under challenge due to major societal and political transformation processes, internationalization and diminishing governance powers of the State.1 About 15 years ago, the literature on civil-military relations started to point to challenges to the military due to changes in technologies, norms regarding the use of force and adaptation to systems of all-volunteer recruitment.2 The role of the military institution is thus – like other State institutions – developing in a complex process the consequences of which are so far insufficiently analyzed from a civil-military relations perspective. The functional and societal imperatives that are traditionally seen to determine the status of civil-military relations (Huntington, 1957) are undergoing major changes in Western post-materialist societies – defined as societies in which large parts of the populations enjoy social and physical security and therefore focus increasingly upon values such as self-fulfilment (Inglehart, 2008). Research shows that, despite vast organizational and strategic differences, both major countries such as the US and minor ones like Sweden are seeing similar changes in the relationship between the military institution and society (Holmberg, 2015; Liebert & Golby, 2016).

Although the forces that affect institutions are many, legitimacy seems to be a common denominator for their survival, and the ability to adapt and evolve in new ways to remain legitimate is essential.3 Previous research defines social legitimacy as “a broad, empirically determined, societal acceptance of the system” (Weiler, 1999, p.80). Although the present article’s focus is not limited to the sole consideration of social legitimacy, this is also the definition of legitimacy it will rely on. In these authors’ understanding, legitimacy is at the heart of both the functional and the societal imperative, and thus a key to understanding civil-military relations.

We argue that the military institution is faced with increasing, and in some cases new, political and social legitimacy demands that we understand as linked to the post-materialist society. The literature that has previously recognized this is scattered in different fields. Legitimacy demands stem from processes of “normalization”, including New Public Management (NPM) norms in public administration4; a changing republican contract due to increasing post-materialist values in society5; changing norms with regard

2 Moskos et al., 2000; Burk, 2002; Forster, 2006; Szvircsev Tresch & Leuprecht, 2010.
4 Deverell et al., 2015; Holmberg, 2015.
5 Moskos et al., 2000; Burk, 2002; Levy & Mizrahi, 2008.

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to the use of force\(^6\); and increasing difficulties in meeting the functional demands placed on militaries due to a broadened threat perception and changes in the way force is used.\(^7\) This article aims to increase knowledge on the dynamics of interaction between these demands as well as on how military institutions react to and manage them, and thus hopefully to enhance our understanding of how civil-military relations are changing in post-materialist societies.

The article directs attention to how the Swedish military relates to legitimacy. Sweden is an interesting example, since it is a society that has been characterized as highly post-materialist (Inglehart, 2008, p.137). A popular national narrative makes much of the fact that the country has not engaged in war for 200 years. Following 1945, economic growth and the development of the welfare State built a society that was not too preoccupied with existential security. However, militarily non-aligned Sweden maintained a comparatively large, conscription-based military institution as insurance during the Cold War. After the fall of the Soviet Union, as post-materialist values peaked in Western Europe, a process of demilitarization took place in the country and an all-volunteer force was created in 2010 (Holmberg, 2015). The post-Cold War period, in Sweden as in many other West European countries, was characterized by major defence reform, consisting of the transformation of standing forces into expeditionary forces complying with international standards. These forces were used in international operations, mainly within the framework of the UN, NATO and the EU. The decision to remain militarily non-aligned after the end of the Cold War continues to be an issue of debate in Sweden.\(^8\) Following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the defence budget was strengthened in 2015. Furthermore, a return to a (partial) system of conscription was decided upon by the Swedish parliament in spring 2017.

Research shows that the legitimacy of the Swedish Armed Forces has suffered during the last decades. Legitimacy problems have been both internal (resistance towards changes within the military institution) and external (low confidence towards the military institution among the public and politicians) and have mostly been linked to security and defence transformation processes in one way or another.\(^9\)

Thus, recent events would suggest that due to growing difficulties generated by Sweden’s post-materialist society, civil-military relations are up for a potential “clash” between the functional and the societal imperative. Such forthcoming challenges make Sweden an especially interesting case for the study of the changes affecting today’s civil-military relations. Although national contexts are specific, the conclusions to be drawn from the present case-study can serve comparative purposes for future research.

\(^6\)Mc Innes, 2002; Sheehan, 2008; Neumann, 2014.
\(^7\)Haaland Matlary, 2009; King, 2011.
\(^8\)Petersson, 2011; Holmberg & Hallenberg, 2017.
\(^9\)Petersson, 2011; Brandow et al., 2013; Ydén & Berndtsson, 2014. While some of the literature also points to broader societal trends as sources of legitimacy problems (Brante et al., 2015; Deverell et al., 2015; Holmberg, 2015), the authors concerned do not in any detail address the potential challenges that such legitimacy problems raise for civil-military relations.
The time bracket considered is 2001 to 2015, a period in which the Swedish military underwent major transformations. Before 2001, the changes brought by the end of the Cold War had not resulted in any significant political reform (Eriksson, 2006), and thus the imprint on the armed forces can be expected to have been weak. The period that has elapsed since 2016 would of course have been of prime interest, but documentation and data were mostly still lacking on it at the time the present study was conducted. Future research will have to show whether the renewed focus upon the functional imperatives of the Swedish Armed Forces (SAF) had the power to diminish the pressures of the social imperatives and the post-materialist society, or how they managed to integrate.

In order to capture the perspective of the military institution, a qualitative textual analysis has been conducted to provide answers to the following research questions: what legitimacy demands are identified by the SAF, and how does the institution respond to these demands? The texts chosen for analysis are the annual reports that the SAF submit to the Government. These are documents consisting of several hundred pages, reporting on how the SAF have performed their duties and missions during the year. They are the most comprehensive source available for analyzing the views of the Swedish Armed Forces. The regularity of the source, and the structure of the document are precious assets for the purposes of a study that covers a rather long time-period. Following particular events and contacts with the press, or analyzing the SAF’s official website as a source of empirical material might have given additional angles on the subject of the study. Major events are duly mentioned in the annual reports, however, and important developments are therefore unlikely to have been missed.

The documents were approached inductively, and read with the purpose of finding sections in the texts where the SAF explicitly or implicitly related to either positive or negative aspects of their standing in terms of legitimacy. In short: what issues are presented as important for external assessments of the military institution? How are these dealt with? Very often in the documents, some kind of evaluation is offered regarding the performance of the SAF. These assessments usually contain views about how the SAF is perceived by actors in the external environment. The sections of importance were collected and after close reading they were sorted into categories showing that the SAF identify legitimacy demands in three main areas: demands for effective administrative control; questioning of power and capability; and social attractiveness. These categories have been allowed to steer how the empirical results are presented in the following sections of this article. All citations were translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

The results of the textual analysis conducted in order to capture how the SAF views its legitimacy challenges constitutes the greater part of the empirical material used for this study. However, there was also a need to capture how individuals within the institution think about legitimacy. Lack of legitimacy implies that there is incongruence between the values associated with the organization and those prevailing in its environment, upon
which organizational survival and success depend.\textsuperscript{10} This is a situation that is bound to be challenging to individuals in the organization.\textsuperscript{11}

For that purpose, two focus groups were constituted and two interviews conducted (drop-outs in a planned third focus group turned it into interviews), and such exchanges were transcribed and analyzed. Each focus group consisted of 3-5 participants at different levels of military education: officer cadets (normally in their 20s), captains (normally in their 30s) and majors (normally in their 40s). The questions posed to the individuals were similar to those raised in analysing the documents, but with a focus on the individual perspective: what legitimacy challenges to the military institution do you perceive, and how do you deal with this? The reflections collected during these meetings were not intended to be representative of all officers within the organization, but to reflect their views and give individuals in the institution a “voice”. These views are illustrated here through examples in relation to the analysis of the annual reports.\textsuperscript{12}

In the following, previous research was used to identify legitimacy challenges facing military institutions. The inductive study’s results are discussed in relation to the legitimacy challenges identified in the literature. Finally, we analyze how the post-materialist society challenges the relationship between the State and the military, and how the dynamics of the functional and societal imperatives unfold in this context.

**Military Institutions and Legitimacy: The Need for Renewed Attention**

Following Huntington (1957), the concept of control has been central in the discussion about civil-military relations (Travis, 2016). Underlying this discussion, however, are the basic functional and societal imperatives that are considered to influence the relationship between the society, politicians and the military (Huntington, 1957, p.2). We take the idea of functional and societal imperatives as an overarching starting point, but chose to focus on the concept of legitimacy as key to understanding the role of the military as a political instrument in 21st century Europe. Legitimacy is a dynamic factor that determines the quality of civil-military relations in a given context, and therefore also the extent to which the military can be used by the State.

However, in order to assess these issues, it is not enough to gauge how the military is perceived by society, for example through public opinion data on issues of security and defence. One also needs to analyze how the military institution itself manages the pressure that changes in legitimacy demands imply. The military cannot be treated theoretically and analytically as a black box that can be counted on to function smoothly despite the major challenges that it is faced with. We need to open the box and inquire further into how developments are being managed within the institution, because it is essential for how the relationship between the armed forces and society will evolve in the future. However,

\textsuperscript{10} Johnson, Dowd & Ridgeway, 2008.

\textsuperscript{11} Henderson-Loney, 1996 ; Grant, 1996.

\textsuperscript{12} The empirical data consisting of individual perspectives will be further analyzed in another article focusing upon the psychosocial implications of a declining legitimacy for personnel in the armed forces.
before attending to this empirical task, we turn to previous research in order to highlight what potential legitimacy challenges that the literature provide.

In the last century’s last decades, the State started to lose (or wilfully abandon) some of its sovereign powers due to growing globalization processes and changing social structures.¹³ Technological developments and the changes they brought to military art challenged Cold War militaries, and their focus on Europe gave way to new overseas missions entailing the need for integration and cooperation.¹⁴ This leads us to the first legitimacy challenge. For the military institutions themselves, the broadening of and sharp changes in functional roles proved problematic in more ways than one, notably when it came to internal acceptance. The development of military capabilities takes time, and the goals need to be specific. The diffuse goals that followed from the military institutions themselves, the broadening of and sharp changes in functional roles proved problematic in more ways than one, notably when it came to internal acceptance. The development of military capabilities takes time, and the goals need to be specific. The diffuse goals that followed from

¹⁴ Mérand, 2008 ; Haaland Matlary, 2009 ; King, 2011.
¹⁵ King, 2011 ; Petersson, 2011 ; Holmberg & Hallenberg (eds.), 2017.
previous uniqueness and has been forced to absorb the military organization’s adaptation to the standards of other State institutions.\textsuperscript{18} Increasingly, political scientists are also beginning to notice this trend of diminishing uniqueness – often associated with demands derived from what is termed New Public Management (NPM). This means that the military institution is not excepted from the administrative requirements that other State authorities face – be it communication and transparency or budget control.\textsuperscript{19} We argue that normalization implies changing legitimacy demands for the military institution. The implications of this for the dynamics of civil-military relations are among those that have not received enough attention in the literature so far.

A final strand in the literature that could be of relevance for determining the status of civil-military relations resides in the emphasis placed by some authors on the normative change in relation to the use of force. The debate that has taken place on changing norms regarding the use of force and just war has been centred on political discourses about when and how a righteous war should be fought.\textsuperscript{20} In a similar vein, the literature has observed an increasing normative distance to the use of force in the West, both among political elites and the public.\textsuperscript{21} Pattison (2011, p.150) argues that this focus is too narrow, and suggests it should be expanded to include the legitimacy of the military itself – problematizing who fights the war. He introduces an approach addressing how different military organizations meet the criteria of effectiveness, democratic control and proper treatment of personnel (ibid.). Such emphasis on norms about the use of force comes closer to how the military itself comprehends its role and appropriateness.

To sum up: previous literature thus provides us with at least four different sources of legitimacy challenges facing military institutions – functional role changes; the weakening of the republican contract; normalization processes; and normative change in the norms regarding resort to force. The dynamic between these and their implications for civil-military relations is further discussed in the conclusions.

**Managing Legitimacy in the Swedish Armed Forces**

**Budget Control – Keeping Track of the Billions through Cultural Change**

The issue of budget control was distinctly present from the beginning of the period studied. At that time, the SAF was the target of media campaigns regarding lost billions and “black holes” in the organization’s finances. It is very clear that this left an imprint in the military institution and was perceived as an issue with major implications for legitimacy:

The goal is twofold: the Swedish Armed Forces shall be in full control of its internal budget and the trust in the Swedish Armed Forces’ management of its major financial resources shall be restored both in the Government [statsmakterna] and among the public [Swedish Armed Forces, 2001, p.12].

\textsuperscript{18} Moskos \textit{et al}., 2000 ; Burk, 2002.
\textsuperscript{19} Deverell \textit{et al}., 2015 ; Holmberg, 2015.
\textsuperscript{20} Finnemore, 2003 ; Coleman, 2007 ; Bjola, 2009.
\textsuperscript{21} Mc Innes, 2002 ; Sheehan, 2008 ; Neumann, 2014.
In his further comments, the supreme commander seemed to bank on cultural change – the acceptance of new norms of behaviour – with respect to managing this issue within the institution. He wrote that the SAF had to get used to a new “level of normality” and “a strict budget discipline including observance of the rules that regulate this area” (ibid., p.6; see also Swedish Armed Forces, 2002, p.4)

Budget control continued to be a serious issue even after the worst phase of the crisis was over. The leadership of the SAF emphasized the need to act responsibly. The context in which it took place was a situation where no threat against the country was envisaged, and budget control could easily be prioritized without implications for security. This issue seems to have come as a surprise for the SAF, which goes to show that the military was not aware that it would be subjected to the same scrutiny as all other State authorities. However, the SAF leadership adapted quickly, through a PR campaign stressing concerns over the severity of the situation for the organization. Its very responsiveness suggests, however, that it realized that the military institution’s legitimacy was at stake.

The demand for budget control could be seen as the outcome of a process of demilitarization and normalization where the exceptionalism traditionally associated with the military had faded away following the end of the Cold War (Holmberg, 2015). This is a trend that is most likely shared by many West European military institutions. Only in unique situations, like the responses to terrorism in France and the Netherlands during 2015-2017, do we see examples of very high securitization of societies overruling this “normalization”.

It is clear that this development created a need to bolster legitimacy that was new to the armed forces. The demand for effective administrative control of its budget left a significant imprint upon the institution from the beginning of the 2000s onwards. For several years, the internal focus upon effective administrative control continued, and appears to have been accepted internally. The Government also imposed different forms of control and evaluation mechanisms upon the SAF, some of which were felt in the organization over ten years later.

**Capabilities: From Candid Assessment to Declaration**

Capabilities, both directly and indirectly connected to legitimacy, are a major chapter in the annual reports. What resources are laced at the SAF’s disposal, and whether they are sufficient, has been the subject of a continuous discussion in the public sphere since the end of the Cold War. The annual reports traditionally offer a general review of capabilities, with a focus upon their degree of adequacy to the main defence tasks. At the beginning of the period studied, this assessment was quite detailed with diversified assessments of various capabilities (Swedish Armed Forces, 2001, p.12). In 2014, the annual report was content to mention that “the SAF has upheld capability” in this or that area, without providing detailed assessments. Indeed, the previous style of presentation implied an implicit critique of existing levels, and became problematic when the reform of the SAF imposed declining resources and use of capabilities in multiple roles. How were
inadequate capabilities to be presented? This could be one of the reasons why the general review became more and more diffuse over the years, and betrays an awareness of the importance of this issue for the trust in the SAF, and though not directly spelled out the implications of language for legitimacy.

There are, however, more direct connections between capabilities and legitimacy:

Support for society in connection with high levels of flooding in southern Sweden has been conducted with conscription personnel and the home guard. The activity has received great appreciation from the civilian parts of the society [Swedish Armed Forces 2002, p.17; similar texts in 2005, p.7; 2014, p.14].

It is extremely rare that State ceremonial tasks are highlighted as being of importance in the annual reports. However, one occasion can be noted:

The SAF participated in H.R.H. the Crown princess’ wedding ceremony with both troops and materiel from all branches. In total, about 7000 individuals, many from the home guard and the voluntary organizations, took part. [...] The result was good and contributed positively to the reputation of the Swedish Armed Forces [Swedish Armed Forces, 2010, p.37].

International capabilities (required by participation in international missions or exercises) were almost exclusively portrayed through references to positive external assessments of the SAF’s capability. Thus, the issue of capabilities for international tasks introduced a new, external “legitimacy base” outside of Sweden that was not clearly present earlier: the SAF now had to field military units that fulfilled EU and NATO requirements (Swedish Armed Forces, 2002, p.4). Gradually, the international dimension became more important:

The Swedish Armed Forces have during the year made important contributions to international peace operations. [...] Our ability to meet the demands of the Government and the international community has been good. In relation to this, it should be noted that the SAF have, with extremely short preparation, been able to give an effective and highly valued contribution to the EU-led rapid-reaction Operation Artemis in Congo [Swedish Armed Forces, 2003, p.5; similar formulation in 2004, p.5].

International operations introduced new dimensions of various kinds. In this context, implications for both internal and external legitimacy became apparent. Operations implying risks now had to be managed in order to uphold internal legitimacy (Swedish Armed Forces 2005, p.4). A year later, the supreme commander noted that “Demands from the operational level and rapidly emerging demands from the units in the area of operations need to be handled more smoothly by the organization. This is also confidence-building for our personnel” (Swedish Armed Forces, 2006, p.1). Personal

safety issues became more salient from an employer’s perspective. Indirectly, this is a question of legitimacy and attractiveness (Swedish Armed Forces, 2004, p.41) inasmuch as military recruitment and retention were now being discussed in relation to the ordinary rules and regulations governing the labour market.

The external dimension of these risks was also important. Here, the supreme commander noted a high level of support for the SAF at the national level:

Casualties will in the long run be inevitable, even if everything possible is done to avoid them. The political and military unity concerning Sweden’s international operations is nearly total, which is shown in the decisions that were made late in 2005 regarding the expansion of the operation in Afghanistan [Swedish Armed Forces, 2005, pp.4-5].

Unrealistic expectations are one point raised by the individuals interviewed. On the one hand, the general public is perceived to believe that the SAF are in no position to counter threats; on the other, the military is expected to take care of any dangerous situation that occurs (at yet other times it is considered unnecessary). The public is perceived to have no understanding of asymmetric threats. Another point is that the interviewees experience a lack of understanding of the costs and the environmental imprint entailed by the SAF’s very existence. If the defence establishment receives a budget increase, the expectations are felt to rise absurdly.

The interviewees do not feel understood, respected, acknowledged, accepted, visible and appreciated. Although they want to do very much for the society they are there to defend, they feel questioned and limited by restraints imposed by it and its political rulers, squeezed between their sometimes conflicting requirements. These are rapidly changing, and managing them is a challenge for the institution when it comes to defining its roles and capacity accordingly.

The defence reforms of the 1990s and 2000s implied decreased capabilities and new demands. To understand and internalize this reorientation process was difficult for the military amid endless public debates. The challenges both to its external and internal legitimacy could easily be related to changes in its functional roles, in line with previous research findings. The military institution seems to have an almost compulsive need again and again to use the phrase: “The task has been successfully fulfilled“, or some variation involving even more positive assessments. Of course, this traditional discourse makes it very difficult to present negative results – how is it to communicate an inability to fulfil functional demands without losing legitimacy? This is likely to be a problem inherent in the military profession, and one widely shared by many military institutions outside Sweden.

The military attitude towards its transformed role was ambiguous (Eriksson, 2006). In the early 2000s, while the SAF leadership did its best to provide internal information on the reforms, it took time before the full meaning of external demands became accepted and internalized. Positive international assessments of the SAF’s capabilities were, however, continuously been put forward, both as regards “hardware” and the “software” of human performance in the field. External international actors were thus taken seriously in terms of
their demands upon the Swedish military, and can be seen as having played a large role in bolstering its legitimacy. The legitimacy of the military institution in the 21st century is thus not only dependent upon the national societal and political context, but also on the international environment.

**Personnel Supply – Realizing the Importance of Social Attractiveness**

*The Situation before 2009*

Personnel issues are a broad and complex topic with many connections to legitimacy – although these connections are surprisingly absent in the reasoning of the SAF. At the beginning of the period, the military suffered from larger than expected personnel attrition levels. It was noted that “*military officers are generally sought after on the labour market*” (Swedish Armed Forces, 2001, p.32), which – while it could be seen as a positive state of affairs in terms of legitimacy – had immediate negative implications for the military when it came to meeting force level goals. In 2002, the supreme commander initiated a meeting with high-ranking representatives from the industry and the public sector. The purpose was to improve their understanding of the defence reform, and in particular the needs of the SAF with respect to reserve officers.\(^{23}\) This initiative re-emerged about 10 years later, as the shift to an-volunteer defence had been decided upon. At this point, a great deal of effort went into recruiting personnel and facilitating transfer of personnel back to civilian careers after separation from the SAF.

However, an outflow of personnel is not only positive. It was noted that…

Trust in the public authority [SAF] when it comes to its role as employer is improved when the world around it realizes that it deals with employer issues in a consistent manner over time, on the basis of the SAF’s policies and needs and of the Swedish labour market’s time-honoured traditions and best practice. In this situation, the SAF’s attractiveness as an employer is strengthened [Swedish Armed Forces, 2002, Appendix 3, p.39].

In 2004, amid large personnel reductions, special emphasis was laid upon the SAF as an employer\(^{24}\) in recognition of the need to establish a positive view of itself in that regard at a time when international missions made it necessary to staff greater numbers of operational slots. At that time, conscription was still in place – although fewer and fewer individuals did participate every year. There was also a need to broaden recruitment to comply with the political demand for more diversity. The SAF focused on the accession of women and nationals of immigrant backgrounds. This was not presented as an issue with implications for legitimacy, however, but framed to be “*a strength and asset for the SAF*”.\(^{25}\)

The solutions for recruiting and retaining women was to adapt the accession process, create female recruitment networks and tailor personal equipment to fit women.\(^{26}\)


During 2002, there was an increase in the number of women who applied for conscript rank-and-file and officer positions. At the same time, however, female senior officers were leaving in droves, which was considered particularly worrisome, since they were “needed in field units as role models and pioneers for the conscripts”. In 2004, successful recruitment campaigns targeting young women were terminated due to financial difficulties, which flew in the face of a 2003 review’s conclusion that transparent selection processes improve the military’s employer image and reduce the risk of discrimination.

In 2005, the SAF launched a new recruitment programme targeting the young. For that purpose, it laid stress on the civilian benefits of military service, presented as awareness-raising and generally positive. In 2007, its scope was widened: “The SAF consider this effort essential in order to succeed in the competition for the most suitable workforce”, and its focus placed on “attractiveness over time, the SAF as trademark and a coherent employment offer”.

In 2002, the SAF participated in an EU project in order to make its anti-discrimination efforts more effective. It was pointed out that this would affect legitimacy and attractiveness.

[The project will] contribute to a more competent and open Armed Force with regard to attitudes towards homosexuality. In the short term, this should serve to improve the internal service environment, and in the long term, lay the foundations for a future personnel supply [of improved size and quality]. Concretely, the effort will involve a social-scientific survey of the existing state of affairs, from which tools will be derived for the conduct of non-disruptive value change [in the organization] [Swedish Armed Forces, 2002, Appendix 3, p.30].

The same year, the SAF participated in the Pride festival, on the occasion of which the supreme commander received a prize. In 2004, a large project was conducted which aimed to compare the values prevailing in the parent society with those observed among SAF personnel. The project also included a study of the public’s trust in the SAF. Parts of the results were reported the following year:

[…] SAF service members hold about the same values as the Swedish public on tolerance issues, such as for instance equality, refugees and other cultures. The aim for the coming years is that a majority among them fully embrace the SAF transformation, and as regards tolerance, that the situation prevailing in the SAF be in fact even better than among the general public [Swedish Armed Forces, 2005, p.14].

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In 2006, the value project is presented as central to the defence reform. The SAF pledged to achieve unity: “A common value basis – ONE Armed Force; a reduced cultural gap between civilian and military personnel; an attractive workplace and appreciated employer; improved confidence in top leaders through a change in leadership style”.35

The same document went on to aver that…

Culture affects the organization’s inner life, consciously and unconsciously. Fundamental values create attitudes/thoughts that in turn fashion behaviours. A strong, old culture and strong ideas are “in the walls”. Therefore the behaviour of the SAF [personnel] needs to be shaped by desirable, suitable [ideas/culture/values] that are in line with political demands [Swedish Armed Forces, 2006, Appendix 3, Personnel Report, pp.18-19].

Thus, it dawned on the leadership at that time that the challenge of making the military more attractive was but one facet of a broader, genuine legitimacy problem that needed to be dealt with within the military institution.

Strategies to Attract More Applicants to the All-Volunteer Force

In 2009, personnel supply turned into the main issue of concern for the SAF. The supreme commander wrote:

The single most important and difficult task […] is to implement the personnel recruitment reform that the Government has initiated. […] The reform demands active support from the Government, Parliament and society as a whole [Swedish Armed Forces, 2009, p.4].

The following year (2010), a slightly different formulation reversed the order of priority among sources of support:

One of the most important requirements […] is that the whole society back the principles that Parliament and the government have decided upon as regards the widening of the pool of military applicants [Swedish Armed Forces, 2010, p.6].

In 2011, the SAF described the personnel supply reform as a “societal reform with security policy facets” (Swedish Armed Forces, 2011, p.435). The annual report for that year bore a short slogan printed on its cover: “The Swedish Armed Forces and our military units proudly serve and act, respected in Sweden and abroad“.

During that year, the military signalled some stress in relation to personnel supply and attraction, now no longer taken for granted. However, its “attraction process” (Swedish Armed Forces 2009, pp.43-44) drew special attention. Underlying the thinking on it was the assumption that all it would take to enhance the military’s attractiveness was to develop a structured process. Studies were launched in order to assess the attractiveness of the SAF “brand”. However, insights about the need for cultural transformation were not forgotten:

The cultural transformation effort aims, amongst other things, to highlight how the move from conscription to all-volunteer defence affects aspects such as corporateness and leadership, as well as the need for understanding the changes [Swedish Armed Forces, 2009, Appendix 2, p.8].

There appeared to be considerable uncertainty as to the reform’s eventual success: whether force level goals could be met, whether the SAF brand image could be improved, and whether civilian employers would assent to the proposed status of reservists if it involved employees more or less regularly absent from their jobs while on military duty (Swedish Armed Forces 2010, p 41-42).

In 2010, a more substantial analysis was offered:

Studies conducted during 2010 show that knowledge of the SAF in society is generally low, both regarding its organization and its employer role. […] The SAF’s image is focused on negative aspects. […] The military is seen as static, hierarchical and old-fashioned, lacking modern structure and thinking. […] There is a stereotypical picture of the SAF, which hinders them from being seen as a potential employer [Swedish Armed Forces, 2010, Appendix 2, p.9].

In short, legitimacy was found to be low, with obvious implications for recruitment, retention, and force level requirements. These findings led the SAF to adopt a strategy that aimed to “enhance the confidence in the organization”, “establish the SAF as an employer” and pursue recruitment outreach (Swedish Armed Forces 2010, Appendix 2, p.10).

How did individual service members respond to this situation? The interviewees did not feel that the public recognized the risks to which military personnel are exposed. They also perceived a distinct lack of faith in, or even feelings of wariness about the military and the use of force (often due to a focus on non-violence). They discerned blanket criticism of, or a general lack of interest in the SAF. In their eyes, this is because the general public focuses on rights rather than on obligations. However, the interviewees reported that experience of direct contact with civilians produced less negative perceptions.

To return to the institution as a whole, in the early 2010s, the SAF continued to focus heavily upon recruitment and retention issues. International missions, in particular, created new problems, or highlighted old ones: much-needed specialists proved hard to recruit, military pay was seen as unattractive, and the benefits of military service were low.36 By 2013, the situation had improved: the annual report for that year states that the volume of applicants for positions in the military had distinctly increased, and fewer among existing personnel chose to leave prematurely. However, individual assessments of basic military training [GMU] were still low, and among those undergoing it many chose not to continue in the SAF. In order to make it more attractive, the tempo was slowed down by adding one week to the training schedule.37

It was by then fully recognized that equality and non-discrimination are important issues in order to be an attractive employer. The SAF focused on analyzing why women did not experience life in the military in the same positive way as men did, for instance, and subscribed to a governmental programme on equality.38 During 2013, the issue of veterans

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36 Swedish Armed Forces 2011, Appendix 4, special reports, p.7.
38 Swedish Armed Forces, 2013, pp.29-30, 47.
was also on the agenda. The effort centred on improving the civilian benefits of former service members, seen as contributing to the armed forces’ societal anchoring.\textsuperscript{39}

In 2014, particular emphasis was laid upon the military as an attractive employer for youth. The SAF appeared quite optimistic due the attention that recruitment campaigns had received and to the general public’s increased knowledge about the military.\textsuperscript{40} The report for that year stated, however, that it is essential for the SAF to be seen as an organization characterized by equality.\textsuperscript{41} In 2015, specific solutions to increase the number of servicewomen were presented: increased [internal] information about how to recruit females and renewed stress on making the SAF live by its values.\textsuperscript{42} It was also reported that the newly decided upon repetition training had been well received.\textsuperscript{43} This could be seen as a small “test-case” for the legitimacy of a reintroduction of conscription, then in the early stages of being discussed.\textsuperscript{44}

\textbf{Conclusions}

The texts analyzed focused upon issues relating to personnel supply, employer attractiveness, equality, tolerance and values. The SAF’s needs were front and centre. Slowly, however, the awareness grew that the public perception of the military, its culture and the individuals within it had the potential to affect social attractiveness and legitimacy. The decision to move to an all-volunteer force is likely to have been a decisive factor for this development, as it is at this juncture that the problems in relation to the military’s ability to attract the young in sufficient numbers – a fragile republican contract – emerged.

At the same time, other legitimacy challenges identified in the literature could also easily be related to social attractiveness. The new roles and functions of the armed forces may be more or less attractive; normalization may imply higher demands upon the military as an employer, particularly among youths – who can be expected to be the main carriers of post-materialist values in society. The SAF are affected by broader political trends that are common to most public bureaucracies, such as the influence of New Public Management (NPM) tenets as well as societal value changes characteristic of the post-materialist society, such as individualization and lesser adherence to traditional values commonly associated with the military. This development needs to be perceived and analyzed by the institution and the individuals within it – a process that is likely to take time and be challenging. The analysis shows that the military institution has problems managing some of these demands. A strand of discourse that is common in the texts studied, and could provide some explanation for the reluctance to embrace new demands, is the habit to assess every issue and political directive in relation to the needs of the SAF

\textsuperscript{39} Swedish Armed Forces 2013, Appendix 2, Personnel Report, p.49.
\textsuperscript{43} Swedish Armed Forces, 2015, p.45.
\textsuperscript{44} In spring 2017, the Swedish Parliament decided to reintroduce conscription – on a gender-neutral basis. However, it was to function in parallel with volunteer service.
and its internal interests. This indicates reluctance on the part of the military organization to redefine its role(s) in a fast-changing national and international context. It also suggests a rather short-sighted perspective upon its own legitimacy. The gender equality issue is an example of this. It took many years for the SAF to view it as a necessity for gaining social acceptance – it was long treated as a “business” rather than as an “equity” case.

The present study’s findings show that the challenges in relation to legitimacy experienced by the Swedish Armed Forces can be grouped into three main categories: demands for effective administrative, not least budget, control; a questioning of power and capabilities; and social attractiveness. Interestingly, we do not see any indication that the Swedish military perceives itself as insufficiently concerned about normative change regarding the use of force. Here, the SAF probably benefited from their close association with the country’s “humanitarian” foreign policy.

Legitimacy demands relate to both the functional and societal imperatives, deeply intertwined – as issues surrounding capabilities and personnel safety amply show. This can be seen as an example of the effects of the post-materialist society on civil-military relations. The study’s results indicate that the military institution has difficulties adapting to a situation of diminished uniqueness and changing legitimacy requirements. Purely administrative demands seem easier to accept and adhere to than more diffuse societal perceptions and value changes. The military institution has a method for managing the first kind of challenge, but the second type is harder for it to identify, and may demand deeper changes, which will take longer to implement.

The transformation processes that have spurred developments in civil-military relations have not been entirely conscious and politically under control – they are part of spontaneous post-materialist trends that characterize most of the Western world –, but both the military and the individuals within it tend to “blame” the politicians and the public for the new demands and challenges that are imposed on them. One example is the changes in the all-volunteer organizational format which was decided upon in 2009. However, there were problems relating to attractiveness even before this decision was made.

Positive signs of adaptation are, however, have begun to emerge over the last few years. Therefore, the return to a (minority) conscription system carries the risk of throwing the armed forces back several decades when it comes to such modernizing adaptation. The demands for legitimacy and employer attractiveness are, however, not likely to diminish with the re-introduction of the conscription system. If the armed forces fail to recognize them and act accordingly, the quality of civil-military relations in Sweden may well substantially diminish. As a consequence, the State may lose some of its ability to use the military as a political instrument.

In the context of the post-materialist society, there seems to be a definite need for future research to take a fresh look at the quality of the triangular relationship between politicians, society and the military institution. As this relationship is socially constructed, it cannot be taken for granted and should continually be critically examined. Three areas
appear of special importance for the military: its ability to adapt to norms regarding public administration (including norms regarding effectiveness and values) ; managing to survive in an environment marked by diminished power over capabilities ; and understanding how to be socially attractive. Legitimacy is a central concept to address issues that may shape future civil-military relations in a much more informal way than previous literature had envisaged.

References


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