Tibet and the Swedish Silence.

An examination of Swedish Foreign Policy Documents and the Press

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In 1968 Sweden became internationally known for its support of suppressed peoples of the Third World. Olof Palme, minister in the Swedish government, caused sensation in the international press when he walked side by side with North Vietnam’s ambassador in a demonstration against the American warfare in Vietnam. Later in 1968 the press photo of Swedish Foreign Minister Sten Andersson holding the Palestinian leader Arafat’s hand when welcoming him to Sweden further demonstrated Sweden’s wish to stand out as defender of suppressed people and as a supporter of their struggle for liberation. In spite of this, Sweden never protested against the invasion of Tibet by China, nor did it support the Tibetan guerrilla. When in 1965 the violations of human rights were at their height in Tibet, Sweden kept silent. In contrast to other Western countries Sweden abstained from voting for the Tibet Resolution in in UNs General Assembly in 1965.

One might ask how Sweden’s contradictory policy be explained? Did Sweden not know what happened in Tibet? Was it only supporting leftist liberation movements? Was Sweden deceived by the Chinese propaganda depicting the Tibetan resistance fighters as a reactionary clique protesting their lost privileges? These are some of the questions which I tried to answer in the research project about the Swedish Tibet policy which I have carried out.

The project was conducted as a part of the Communist Regimes’ Research Program financed by the Swedish Research Council.* I examined Swedish foreign office documents from the 1950s to year 2000 and went through the Swedish Press during the same period.

My conclusion is that the Swedish policy had very little to do with the actual situation in Tibet, neither with the fact that Tibet had been forcefully taken over by China, nor with the serious violations of human rights there.

The Swedish relationship with China and Tibet can be divided into four periods:


* I am grateful of the fundings which I received from the Swedish Research Council.
1) **1947-65.** Emphasis on international law and a cautious policy during the foreign minister Östen Undén. This period is marked by the experiences of the two world wars and the fear of a new world war breaking out. The Korea war is regarded as a confrontation between East and West and the aim is to stay neutral in case of a great war. At the same time Sweden being a member of UN is asked to loyally support Korea and the basic values that Sweden are supposed to stand for.¹ When it comes to Tibet, Sweden avoids taking a stand, but follows largely the stand taken by the Western world.

2) **1966-1975.** The period of the so-called active Foreign Policy dominated by the Prime Minister, Olof Palme, is characterized by support to the Third World and its liberation movements. This includes criticism of European colonialism and imperialism, but not the corresponding colonialism of countries in the Third World and, thus not China’s occupation policy in Tibet. From this period there is a turn in the Swedish Tibet policy and Sweden together with Denmark and Finland abstain from voting for the China critical UN-resolution in 1965. In practice this means a silent acceptance of China’s annexation of Tibet.

3) **1976-1990.** Intensified criticism towards the surrounding world during the non-Socialist government and later a decrease in criticism during the Social Democrats. The Tibet policy from the period of the active foreign policy continues, i.e. there is a conscious policy of being be vague about the issue of Tibet’s political status. The standard formulation is that Sweden does not question China’s sovereignty over Tibet, but the term *de facto control* is now and then used. In the end of the period, the commitment to human rights in China and Tibet increases, especially after the massacre on Tiananmen Square in June 1989 and the Dalai Lama being awarded the Nobel Peace Price the same year.

4) **1990 -.** A greater commitment to Human Rights in China and Tibet. China’s violations of Human Rights are criticized, but at the same time there is an open declaration that Tibet is a part of China even if it is emphasized that Tibet should enjoy a genuine autonomy within China.

**Sweden’s knowledge about Tibet**

Sweden was well aware that Tibet was a separate country, which had been invaded by China. The Swedes even knew that China intended to invade Tibet long before the invasion. The Swedish ambassador in Beijing, Hammarström, wrote to Stockholm on 4 August in 1950, i.e. two months before the invasion. He referred to meetings with Mao Zedong and Chou En-lai, both of them stating that they planned to invade Tibet:²

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² The Archive of the Swedish Foreign Department, 1920 års dossierplan, 30, HP 1, nr. 352, Peking 4.8.1950.
During the conversation which I had in connection with the deliverance of the letters of credence with the head of State, Mao Zedong and at various occasions with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Chou En-lai; these chief statesmen emphasized that the most urgent mission of the Chinese foreign policy being the incorporation of Formosa and Tibet with the state territory.

It is evident that Sweden regarded Tibet and China as two separate countries and viewed China’s plans to enter Tibet as an invasion. The diplomats throughout use words such as “foreign policy”, “invasion” and “occupation” and this is also the way it is described in the Swedish press, except for in the Communist newspapers. But Sweden’s policy was determined by the overall policy to keep out of wars and stay neutral in case of a great war. Judging from the letters of Hammarström, the Swedish ambassador in Beijing, he was rather relieved that China in spite of everything was able to occupy Tibet without any major problems.

When reading the letters to the Swedish Foreign department from the Swedish diplomats it can be concluded that Tibet was sacrificed for the sake of Korea. A Swedish diplomat wrote that it was no secret that several delegations had tried to persuade the leader of the delegation of El Salvador not to submit its proposal about a resolution against China’s invasion of Tibet in 1950. According to the diplomat the reason was obvious: “In the tense situation which prevails in the whole of the Far East it is feared that an intervention in the interests of China might risk any prospect for the organisation to reach practical results with Beijing regarding the far more important question of Korea.”

Sweden also had its own interests in China to safeguard– the Swedish Match factory and the release of Berglöf, a Swedish citizen who had been detained on charge of spying.” On 9 June 1951 ambassador Hammarström wrote to the Swedish Foreign Department emphasizing the importance of the uninterrupted production of “American Far Eastern Match Company, Sweden’s only important investment.” He hoped that Sweden would receive good-will by abstaining from voting on UN’s resolution on China as an aggressor in Korea, but he had been disappointed. Later he wrote about his attempts to free Berglöf and he observed the open unwillingness of the Chinese vice minister in letting him plead Berglöf’s case, which was “a bad omen in this land, where the individual – especially a foreigner – is without legal protection.” He continued his letter relating the increasing difficulties of his fellow countrymen to leave the country. Many of them had applied for exit permit but had been turned down. Officially the wish was to solve the Tibet issue peacefully, but in reality this meant refraining from taking any action at all.

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3 The Archive of the Swedish Foreign Department, 1920 års dossierplan, HP 48, nr. 417, New York 20.11.1950.
4 Skoglund, 1994, p. 25 referring to The Archive of the Swedish Foreign Department, 1920 års dossierplan, HP 1Xk, den 5.3.1951, Riksarkivet.
5 The Archive of the Swedish Foreign Department, 1920 års dossierplan, HP 1Xk, den 9.6.1951, Riksarkivet.
6 The Swedish Foreign Department, 1920 års dossierplan, HP 1Xk, den 22.3.1951, Riksarkivet.
When Sweden refrained from voting for the Tibet Resolution in UN in 1965, this was probably to a certain extent due to the radicalisation of the Swedish foreign policy at the time. The Social Democrats hoped to direct the Vietnam movement into a democratic order and take the lead over it themselves. The natural leader was the young Olof Palme with his political commitment and his good contacts with the youth movements. Sweden also hoped to be able to mediate a peace treaty between North Vietnam/NLF and the US within the so-called Operation Aspen. The contacts continued for years at many places around the world. Torsten Nilsson also had talks with Dean Rusk in Washington, but the mediations did not lead to any results. In 1968 the contacts seized after the publication of an article about Operation Aspen in *Dagens Nyheter*. It is obvious that Operation Aspen would have been negatively influenced or impossible had Sweden voted for the Tibet-resolution in 1965.

**Conclusion**

Examining the Swedish Tibet policy it can be concluded that Sweden was neither better nor worse than any other country. As mentioned, Sweden’s stand on Tibet did not depend on the actual situation in Tibet or the risk for military instability. Sweden followed the stand taken by other countries who in their turn were motivated by their own political, economic and colonial interest. Sweden’s own interests and the absence of interests in Tibet also played a role. When interpreting International Law the Swedish Foreign department refers to the fact that China has kept “effective control” in Tibet and that other countries do not recognize Tibet’s independence. This means that Sweden accepts the military invasion of Tibet and China’s maintenance of control with the help of violence.

By abstaining from voting for the Tibet-resolution during the period when the violations against human rights were at their height in Tibet, the Swedish policy appears rather cynical considering the self-image of a defender of downtrodden people of the world. This underlines the conclusion of Sweden as following a “realistic” rather than a “idealistic” policy in relation to questions of self-determination, i.e. an International Law policy that serves to legitimise Sweden’s policy rather than to actually support peoples struggle for self-determination.