Event Report: Climate Security Scenarios for Sweden
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Erin Sikorsky, Director, CCS; Director, The International Military Council on Climate and Security

Brigitte Hugh, Research Fellow, CCS

Edited by Francesco Femia, Research Director, CSR

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Cover photo: A satellite image of the Fennoscandian Peninsula, Denmark, and other areas surrounding the Baltic Sea covered in snow. Image courtesy Jacques Descloitres / NASA GSFC.

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A satellite image of the Fennoscandian Peninsula, Denmark, and other areas surrounding the Baltic Sea covered in snow.

Image courtesy Jacques Descloiztres / NASA GSFC.
Introduction

In the coming decades, Sweden will face increasing security risks due to climate change. These risks stem primarily from climate hazards outside Sweden’s borders, though warming temperatures and increasingly erratic and intense precipitation may strain the country’s domestic military, energy, and economic infrastructure. External climate security game changers for Sweden include the potential for aggressive Russian and Chinese behavior in a more navigable Arctic, strains on the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) due to increasing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) demands, and the potential for reactionary European political responses to climate-related migration from the Middle East and North Africa. These threats are unlikely to develop on straightforward linear pathways, as climate change intersects with other developments to cause cascading or complex risks. Tipping points—whether from climate change or from societal developments—could amplify these risks on a shorter timeline than expected.

Navigating these risks requires a whole-of-society approach across Sweden that breaks down planning and programmatic siloes among government ministries, civil society and the private sector. To that end, in October 2022, the Swedish Defence University and the Center for Climate and Security convened a cross section of leaders from the military, academia, civil society and the private sector to explore potential future climate security scenarios for Sweden over the next five years. This paper provides an overview of the key findings of the scenarios discussion, including a discussion of drivers of climate security risk, and entry points for action and further research going forward. (See Annex A for more details on the exercise).
Key Findings

Building resilience to climate hazards is as much about good, adaptive governance as it is about physical interventions. A theme across all scenarios was the importance of strengthening societal resilience through investments in a shared information landscape and strong institutions at all levels (local, state, and international). There was particular concern that a fractured media landscape and increased disinformation are already weakening Sweden’s resilience by increasing divisions within society. This in turn makes it more difficult to pursue a cohesive civilian response to both the direct impacts of climate hazards, such as heatwaves and drought, as well as the secondary impacts, such as increased climate-related migration. Additionally, there was recognition that trust in government and strong democratic institutions are important for managing climate security risks across society—and that this good governance is needed at all levels, from local communities to international institutions, such as the EU. These factors were deemed at least as, if not more, important than physical climate change resilience measures, and it was noted they have the added benefit of creating resilience to a wider range of threats (e.g. pandemics, disinformation).

Swedish policymakers and private sector leaders should prioritize mainstreaming and integrating climate change considerations across ministries and sectors. The scenarios discussion underscored that tackling climate security risks will require breaking down silos among government ministries and between the public and private sectors. Leaders should develop mechanisms for regularly bringing climate-related data into strategic planning and decision-making processes, while also ensuring regular cross-talk about preparing for climate hazards among key ministries such as Defense, Infrastructure, Foreign Affairs, Finance, and Environment. At the same time, the need to integrate climate change considerations into the country’s Total Defense1 program was repeatedly underscored, including connecting the preparedness approach of Total Defense

1 Total defense is an approach to security planning that integrates preparation for domestic and foreign threats including war and natural disasters. More on Sweden’s Total Defense concept can be found here: https://www.government.se/press-releases/2017/12/swedish-defence-commission-presents-report-on-total-defence-concept-and-civil-defence/
to the climate challenge. Participants suggested using climate scenarios to stress test the assumptions underlying the Total Defense approach, and encouraged greater collaboration with the scientific community in doing so. Finally, the importance of outreach to the Swedish energy sector was emphasized, with one energy representative noting that this convening was the first time he had an opportunity to consider some of the national security implications of the climate and energy crises.

**Sweden must balance an international approach to climate security (via the EU, the UN, and NATO) with a focus on domestic resilience.** Tackling climate security risks outside Sweden’s borders requires collaboration with international institutions and alignment with their climate security agendas. However, the country needs a separate security strategy to manage domestic adaptation and resilience. For example, the UN Security Council (UNSC) approach to climate security, with its focus on instability and conflict zones in the global South, is less relevant to Sweden’s concerns regarding energy security, climate-related migration, and Arctic threats. Participants agreed that Sweden must set concrete goals for engaging international institutions on this topic. Some especially cautioned that joining NATO in particular provides both opportunities and challenges in this realm. For example, gaming out how Sweden’s current approach to the Arctic—a key climate security flashpoint—may or may not mesh with NATO’s Arctic Strategy (and whether or how NATO’s Arctic Strategy will need to change given the views of new members in the alliance) is worthwhile.

**Sustained resilience requires transformative change.** Throughout the scenarios discussion, it became clear that truly sustained resilience to climate security threats in Sweden would require two significant transformative changes in the economic and political spheres. The first is a shift to creating more slack in energy and food systems, i.e. moving away from ‘just in time’ supply chains to create more redundancy in order to absorb shocks. Sustaining such a shift requires a change in economic systems which all participants acknowledged was a significant hurdle and one that Sweden is not alone in facing. Even so, participants noted that progress is being made by some private sector actors to
build greater redundancy into energy systems in response to the Ukraine crisis. The second shift is prioritizing crisis prevention over crisis response—investing ahead of time in strategic foresight planning and proactive adaptation will make Swedish society more resilient to all manner of shocks. Again, participants recognized that this will be difficult, and that many countries are struggling with the same challenge. The group was optimistic however that the predictive capabilities associated with climate change are a powerful tool that can be used to invest in preparedness.

Participant Discussion: Drivers of Climate Security Futures for Sweden

In the first part of the exercise, participants identified a range of drivers, or external and internal factors, that will shape the trajectory of climate security risks in Sweden across six categories: Socio-political, technological, demographic, diplomatic, military and civil security, and economics. Participants determined that these drivers would intersect with physical climate hazards to determine future security outcomes for the country. The two selected diagnostic drivers (bolded below) were determined to be the most uncertain and the most important to Sweden’s future.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Category</th>
<th>Driver</th>
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| Socio-Political      | • Increased demands on domestic institutions  
                          • Domestic polarization  
                          • Disinformation and segregation  
                          • Empowered extremist movements  
                          • Organized crime  
                          • **Diagnostic driver: Level of strength of democratic institutions** |
| Military and Civil Security | • Stability of NATO  
                          • Increased demands on military resources and civil defense  
                          • Russian military threats  
                          • Instability in MENA region  
                          • **Diagnostic driver: Level of domestic resilience to climate hazards** |
| Demographic          | • Aging population  
                          • Increasing migration  
                          • Stress on Indigenous people (Sami) |
| Technological         | • Geoengineering  
                          • Lack of investment in energy technology  
                          • Carbon capture storage needs |
| Economic             | • Need to protect critical infrastructure, including water, deep seabeds, etc  
                          • Resource demand (more land for food and energy production)  
                          • More demand on government spending  
                          • Supply chain resilience  
                          • Energy supply challenges |
| Diplomatic            | • Strains on EU solidarity, including between rich and poor EU countries  
                          • Strains in UN  
                          • Arctic Council trajectory |
Four Future Climate Security Scenarios

To develop scenarios for discussion, participants identified the following drivers as both the most important, or diagnostic, and the most uncertain in shaping future climate security risks. The first selected driver was the level of strength of democratic institutions, both domestically and internationally (e.g. the EU). The second driver was the level of domestic resilience to climate hazards, including physical and societal infrastructure. The intersection of these drivers creates four potential future worlds for Sweden:

Strong Democratic Institutions and High Domestic Resilience (Utopia)

In this scenario, Sweden has strengthened citizen trust in government and institutions, and successfully integrated migrants into society. The citizenry is active and engaged in public elections, and polarization has decreased. The state and private actors are accountable to Swedish citizens, and civil society is strong. Investments have been made in climate resilience and adaptation measures domestically under the ‘Total Defense’ approach, and are generally viewed as equitably distributed. Sweden is exporting its preparedness and resilience model to NATO and EU partners, and financially supporting efforts to strengthen institutional resilience. Climate security threats have not disappeared in this scenario—Sweden has minimal ability to shape Russian or Chinese behavior in the Arctic, for example, or influence the emissions trajectory of countries like the United States or India—but it is preparing
itself and its partners within its neighborhood to be as resilient and flexible as possible in the face of such threats.

**Weak Democratic Institutions and High Domestic Resilience (Local Rules)**

This scenario is characterized by an indifferent central government but strong civil society and informal institutions. Actors such as churches, NGOs, and possibly even criminal networks step in to provide services and crisis response at the local level. While dependence on local decision-making and informal networks allows for more flexible and speedy responses to climate hazards, the system is fractured and risks competition over resources. Additionally, minority communities with fewer resources are more vulnerable to climate risks. There is less international engagement on climate adaptation and resilience and more of an inward, closed-off focus (i.e. every community for itself). This inward turn, plus the fact that international institutions are less democratic, means there is less opportunity for collaborative engagement on shared challenges, such as the melting Arctic or increased climate-driven migration into Europe.
Strong Democratic Institutions and Low Domestic Resilience (Sweden Today, but Also Not)

High levels of trust in traditional democratic institutions obscure internal rot and waning institutional power in this scenario. Such a future would be characterized by stasis—insitutions will have failed to invest in innovation and evolution to prepare for future threats related to warming temperatures. This may be a scenario in which right-wing nationalist parties have achieved power through democratic means but not prioritized climate adaptation and resilience. Additionally, the ongoing energy crisis sparked initially by the Russian invasion of Ukraine has led Europe and Sweden to focus on energy security at the expense of climate investment, given demands from the public for lower energy costs. There is a high likelihood that governing institutions will not live up to public expectations in responding to climate hazards such as heatwaves, droughts, energy crises, or increased climate-related migration. While this could lead to normal political turnover via regular electoral processes given the strength of democratic institutions, it could also provide openings for foreign disinformation aimed at driving polarization and undermining trust.
Weak Democratic Institutions and Low Domestic Resilience (Panic)

In this scenario, Swedes live in a constant state of insecurity, as government institutions (both domestic and international) function inefficiently. Critical infrastructure across the country starts to break down. There are rising levels of inequality, and wealthy individuals try to wall themselves off from climate change impacts that are straining water and food security across Europe. This scenario is also characterized by increasing divides between rural and urban communities, and increased societal power for energy companies and private security providers. There will be a larger role for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society, but they are only able to patch the holes (i.e. provide emergency response), not get ahead of the crises spurred by climate hazards.

Conclusion

Exploration of these scenarios identified key entry points for Sweden to better prepare itself for managing future climate security risks—investments in governance, collaboration across sectors and ministries, a balanced approach to international institutions, and the importance of pushing for transformational approaches to economic and political systems. Overall, participants ended the discussion with the assertion that Sweden was actually closer to the Utopia scenario than any other they discussed—but that the country must act swiftly to maintain its grip on such a positive trajectory in the face of tomorrow’s climate hazards.