

STOCKHOLM — Everywhere one looks on the eastern fringes of Europe, the Russian bear menaces. From Ukraine to Estonia, Russian troops are either engaged in outright warfare or testing the borders of Russia's neighbors. In Sweden and Finland, Russian planes and vessels are prodding at coastal defenses. Nordic defense officials now speak of a fundamentally altered security environment in the Baltics.

There is a measure of the surreal to these developments and Sweden's response to them. When in October Swedish forces hunted what was all but certainly a Russian submarine in the Stockholm archipelago, Swedish media dispatched reporters into dinghies, where they breathlessly tried to intuit news in the movement of naval vessels. And when Sverker Göranson, the supreme commander of Sweden's armed forces, went before the media last month to present concrete evidence that a submarine had violated his country's territorial waters, a Russian newspaper responded by calling the officer "unmanly."

It was probably meant as an insult, but the writer behind the snub may have unwittingly paid the Scandinavian nation a compliment.

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Margot Wallström, the newly minted foreign minister, has said that under her leadership Sweden will become the only country in the world to conduct a "feminist foreign policy." That's a perspective that flows from U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325, a landmark measure that recognized both the disproportionate impact war has on women and the role women must play in ensuring peace and security.

But questions about what this means in practice and Wallström's foreign-policy moves come at a time of unusual instability for Sweden. The country is headed for a snap election in March after the Sweden Democrats, an ascendant right-wing populist group, blocked the government's budget on Wednesday, Dec. 3. It will be Sweden's first snap election since 1958. Meanwhile, the Russian military is challenging its Swedish counterpart in ways that haven't been seen since the Cold War.

The Social Democrats and the Greens — the two parties that make up the minority government — have said they will campaign together on a joint political platform and will put forward the same budget that was just scuttled. So little looks set to change until March, when fresh elections are held.

In the interim, Wallström will remain at the Foreign Ministry, with her feminist vision for Sweden's ventures abroad intact. By empowering women, the argument goes, there are better chances of snuffing out wars before they start and of ending them in more equitable ways. However, it is less clear what such a feminist foreign policy has to say about the old-school power politics that Putin has helped resuscitate in the past year.

During a recent debate in the Swedish parliament, Wallström said that her feminist approach is based on the American political scientist Joseph Nye's concept of "smart power." "The tools of foreign policy can, in varying degrees, be hard as well as soft. The situation at hand determines this," Wallström said. "The half of the population that so far has been almost systematically excluded and forgotten — namely, women — will now be included."

Asked how she believes a feminist foreign policy will help end Russian aggression, Wallström suggested it would be useful to review women's participation in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and to look at what it does to address the problems women face — a statement exactly as vague as it sounds.

Meanwhile, Putin delivered another swaggering address on Thursday. "The policy of containment was not invented yesterday. It has been carried out against our country for many years, always, for decades, if not centuries," he said at his annual state-of-the-nation address. "In short, whenever someone thinks that Russia has become too strong or independent, these tools are quickly put into use."

The newfound emphasis on feminism abroad has been remarkably absent in the Swedish response to the recent submarine incursion in Stockholm. When Göranson, flanked by Prime Minister Stefan Löfven and Defense Minister Peter Hultqvist, presented evidence at a November press conference of illicit underwater activity in the Stockholm archipelago, there was no talk of gender perspectives or feminist approaches to territorial breaches. (While the Swedish military maintains that it does not have the evidence to conclusively identify the submarine's nationality, it was all but certainly a Russian boat.)

Löfven did not parse his words. "Those who are considering entering Swedish territory should be aware of the enormous risks this entails for those who are involved in such violations," he said. "We will defend our territorial integrity with all available means."

For Löfven, the moment was an opportunity to show leadership after his government's shaky first few weeks in power. A minority government, the Social Democrats and Greens had from the outset been hounded over their weak mandate and lack of experience. To bolster Sweden's defense capabilities and improve coordination,

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(It was a fleeting moment of power: Three weeks later, snap elections are the only subject of conversation.)

But no one quite seems to know how to square that perspective with notions of a feminist foreign policy. “If Sweden would really invest in military defense and at the same time push for a feminist foreign and security policy, then the government faces a big rhetorical problem in explaining how these two things go together,” said Ulf Bjereld, a professor of political science at the University of Gothenburg and a supporter of the Social Democrats.

“One option is to insist that military defense and feminism represent two branches of the same tree: that citizens’ security is guaranteed by having a strong military and that the feminist agenda is guaranteed through diplomacy, aid, and other arsenals beyond defense,” Bjereld said. “Is that credible or not? Well, credibility is like beauty — it’s in the eye of the beholder.”

Wallström herself sees no contradiction between the two. In an interview with Foreign Policy, she said that the Social Democrats’ security policy has always been based on combining the right to territorial defense with an engagement in humanitarianism. “Sweden has been a world power because we have acted constructively to find political solutions and because of our aid policy and contribution to achieving global development,” Wallström insisted.

Whether or not Sweden classifies as a “world power” in the traditional sense of the word is debatable, but the country does pride itself on having a generous aid policy. The total development aid budget for 2014 was around \$5.1 billion. That also covers costs for refugee reception and integration in Sweden, EU assistance, and contributions to the regular budget of some U.N. agencies, leaving about \$4 billion for international aid. (In this regard, Sweden is indeed a world leader, putting .97 percent of its GDP toward aid. The United States, by contrast, spends .19 percent of GDP toward aid.)

Wallström’s feminist foreign policy is based on three Rs: representation, resources, and respect. In its dealings with other nations, Sweden should push for fair representation of women in everything from ambassador posts to political committees, notes Wallström. Sweden should also encourage other countries to ensure equal access to resources and to respect women’s rights, she said.

Wallström argued that this women-focused perspective is relevant in all aspects of foreign policy, including in how Sweden deals with territorial breaches and Russian aggression in nearby countries like Ukraine. “To say it’s not relevant in such situations is to suggest that women don’t think we should have a defense force and that is just not true.”

The gender-focused agenda has also been welcomed by at least some in the Swedish military. One enthusiast is Robert Egnell of Sweden’s National Defense College, which has hosted several seminars on gender perspectives in military operations. In a recent op-

ed for Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter, Egnell wrote that Wallström's stated focus is an "instrument for preventing armed conflict, achieving peace where violence is already a fact, and promoting post-war reconciliation and reconstruction."

Egnell pointed out that Wallström's focus on women, peace, and security is not unique, and has also been embraced by figures such as Hillary Clinton and William Hague, the former British foreign secretary. Wallström's approach, however, is arguably more original in that she has chosen to label efforts to boost women's power and participation as "feminist." She herself insisted that her government is "starting something new here" rather than emulating other international leaders' approaches.

Critics say the Social Democrats' push for a feminist foreign policy amounts to little more than branding. "This is about sending a signal to the world that the new government wants to bring in some kind of paradigm shift after Carl Bildt's time as minister for foreign affairs and to show that, in the international arena, this government's priorities are different," said Katarina Tracz, a research fellow at the McCain Institute for International Leadership and deputy director of the center-right think tank Stockholm Free World Forum.

"When Wallström was appointed, she told Swedish media that she would not evaluate Bildt's time as minister for foreign affairs — and that's because she can't find much to criticize," Tracz said. "But by defining her own approach as feminist, she is indirectly indicating that the previous government fell short of prioritizing women."

Talk of a feminist foreign policy, according to Tracz, is a distraction. "When it comes to the security issues that Sweden and the world face today, it is not at all clear what a feminist foreign policy can achieve," she said. "There are no concrete suggestions for how a gender approach to security policy will help put an end to intrusions in the Stockholm archipelago, for instance."

Wallström's retort is that a feminist foreign policy does have concrete implications. "Are female police officers being allowed to take part in surveillance operations? Are women in a given country being asked about their ambitions?" she said, citing her efforts to include women in the peace-making process in Ukraine. "This perspective should permeate everything we do."

When it comes to simultaneously pushing a hard and soft agenda, the Social Democrats have also faced a challenge from within their own government, given their weakness in the run-up to elections in March. While campaigning for the September election that resulted in the minority government, the Social Democrats' coalition partner, the Greens, pushed for smaller defense budgets and the formation of an EU-led Civilian Peace Corps that, party spokeswoman Åsa Romson said, would push for dialogue and disarmament in international conflicts.

So far, the Social Democrats have steamrolled their partners and presented a budget without concessions to the Greens' demands for cutting defense spending — and the

government has now said it will use that budget as a platform to campaign ahead of the March poll. (And as the submarine hunt got underway, Prime Minister Löfven and Defense Minister Hultqvist both made the case for increasing defense spending in the future.)

Wallström, who spoke to Foreign Policy before Wednesday's budget vote, insisted all was well among the coalition partners. "We have agreed that it is up to the Swedish Defense Commission to determine how much we should spend on defense and exactly what the defense force should be doing," she said, referring to a government-appointed commission charged with undertaking studies on long-term developments in Swedish security and defense policy. "And we are sticking to that."

Divided on the issue with their coalition partners and headed toward yet another election, the government in Stockholm isn't exactly putting up a united front in the face of Russia's actions in the Baltic. While the feminist foreign-policy perspective has important contributions to make as regards the role of women in international conflicts, the divisions in Stockholm could play into the hands of Putin's expansionism.

"No one will ever attain military superiority over Russia," Putin declared Thursday. "We have a modern and combat ready army. As they now put it, a polite, but formidable army. We have the strength, will and courage to protect our freedom."

The dark winter months until the March election will provide Moscow with ample opportunity to test what this feminism really means in practice.