

## SWEDISH FOREIGN POLICY: NEUTRALITY VS. SECURITY

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## Swedish Foreign Policy: Neutrality vs. Security

*All societies have faced sudden and interstitial crises, and in some cases humanity has emerged enhanced* (Michael Mann)

### INTRODUCTION

The year 1814 stands out as one of such crises in Swedish history. Having fought twenty-five wars in less than three hundred years, Sweden decided to abandon its aggressive attitude to the war-prone neighbors and adhere to neutrality. Though it is an indisputable fact that the Scandinavian neutral has not been involved in any military conflict since the beginning of the nineteenth century, it does not imply that the transition from a belligerent empire to a peaceful state has been a smooth process. During the twentieth century, Sweden crossed the fine line between neutrality and political affinity, thus demonstrating that its policy of neutrality is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. The dynamic character of Sweden's foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war can be examined in the light of four major schools of thought: Realism, Economism, Revisionism, and Culturalism.

Proponents of the Realist school of thought point to the anarchic character of international relations. They contend that neutralism is utopian and that Sweden follows Realist foreign policy principles of national self-interest.<sup>1</sup> The Economists, on the other hand, link Sweden's declaration of neutrality to its dependency on trade with both the East and the West. The Revisionist theory is focused on the assumption that Sweden is not as neutral as it claims to

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<sup>1</sup> William Zartman, "Neutralism and Neutrality in Scandinavia," *The Western Political Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (June 1954), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/442454> (accessed September 24, 2010).

be but a secret ally of the U.S.A. and NATO. Lastly, the Culturalist approach places neutrality within a broader cultural-historical context and attempts to explain Swedish tradition of neutrality from the angle of national mentality.

The Realist and Economist approaches best explain the discrepancy between the proclaimed foreign policy of neutrality and the varying degree of its practical application. Both schools of thought treat the state's interests (be it in the sphere of securing the nation's territorial integrity or prosperity) as the main driving force of its behavior on the international arena.

The goal of this paper is to find out how an external threat to Sweden's political and economic security crystallizes its foreign policy of freedom from alliance in peace aiming for neutrality in war. At the heart of the research is the following model:



In order to do so, the following hypothesis will be tested: the larger the scale of the external threat to Sweden's political and economic interests, the more flexible its foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war.

For the analysis of the continuity of Sweden's foreign policy of neutrality under the threat of force majeure, two cases will be selected, namely: the Winter War in 1939–40 and the German occupation of Denmark and Norway in 1940. The concepts of the external threat and flexibility of the foreign policy of neutrality will be evaluated in terms of emotionally colored vocabulary used by the journalists to describe the society's perception of danger emanating from the warring

states (the scale of threat) and Sweden's humanitarian aid and granting transit privileges to the belligerents (neutrality). Should the growth of the external threat be accompanied by either the provision of humanitarian aid or granting the transit privileges to one of the belligerents, the hypothesis will be considered proven.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Once a belligerent nation, Sweden has neither been involved in military action since 1814, nor has it joined any coalitions. This long record of peaceful external relations has been analyzed by four major schools of thought: Realism, Economism, Revisionism, and Culturalism. Each of the theories examines the phenomenon of Sweden's foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality at war from different perspectives. Realism, as the approach most commonly referred to, explains Sweden's neutrality line in the world politics in terms of balance-of-threat and balance-of-power theories, arguing that "Swedish neutrality has been an armed neutrality."<sup>2</sup> The school of Economism believes that Swedish society is highly trade-dependent; thus, pursuing politics of neutrality is viewed as crucial in increasing trade relations both with the East and the West. Revisionism, the approach that emerged at the end of the Cold War period, tries to challenge the neutrality doctrine by claiming that "the Swedish people had been deceived" and that Sweden was a secret ally of the United States and NATO.<sup>3</sup> Culturalism, on the other hand, focuses on Sweden's homogeneity of population, legitimacy of government, and gender equality and comes to the conclusion that the policy of neutrality is a reflection of national mentality.

However, while proclaiming foreign policy of freedom from alliance in piece aiming for neutrality in war, not only did Sweden violate its non-alignment principles during the Second World War, but also joined the European Union in 1995. Furthermore, according to the data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research, Sweden spent 6,135,000,000 USD (or

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<sup>2</sup> Bengt Sundelius, ed., *The Committed Neutral* (Boudler: Westview Press, 1989), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Mikael af Malmberg, *Neutrality and State-Building in Sweden* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 2.

1.3% of GDP) for the military purposes in 2008.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the Realist and the Economist theories are regarded as more valuable for the given research as they focus on the state as the main actor on the international arena; while Culturalism explores the connections between cultural-historical legacy and its impact on domestic and foreign policy, and Revisionism limits its sphere of research to the domain of the Swedish-American relations.

### THE ECONOMIST APPROACH

Economism centers its attention on the economic side of Sweden's foreign policy throughout the twentieth century. The main argument of the scholars belonging to this school of thought is that "Sweden is pursuing a policy, in which its own welfare comes first,"<sup>5</sup> which is illustrated by flexibility of Swedish neutrality.

In the early 1930s in order to maintain production and, thus, ensure employment, Sweden took a pro-German stance supplying the country with iron ore and poison gas.<sup>6</sup> At the same time Sweden joined the League of Nations. This step is regarded today as a strategy to make the Allies believe in Sweden's intent to pursue neutrality with the aim of continuing trade with both sides. In the summer of 1941, Sweden permitted a passage of a German division through its territory to be deployed in Russia as the Swedish economy still depended on the iron ore trade.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sweden's concept of neutrality was challenged by its application for the EEC membership. The country faced the dilemma of either refraining from the alliance and stagnating economically or abandoning the principle of neutrality and continuing the economic prosperity of the nation. In 1994, after three years of negotiating, the European

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<sup>4</sup> Data are taken from the Military Expenditure Database of the Stockholm International Peace Institute, <http://milexdata.sipri.org/result.php4> (accessed October 12, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Sundelius, 176.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 170.

Economic Area Agreement was implemented giving Sweden the economic benefits of membership without political power.

These facts give the scholars grounds to conclude that Sweden's policy of neutrality is characterized through the lens of pragmatic necessity and is based on economic self-interests.

### THE REALIST APPROACH

The Realist tradition is generally concerned with the question of order and stability on the international arena. Its followers (Hans Morgenthau, Stephen Walt, Bruce Hopper, Bengt Sundelius, and others) regarded the world as an anarchic system where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other.<sup>7</sup> According to Realists, states are in constant competition for power and, therefore, resolve the conflicts not "by means of speeches and majority decisions ... but by iron and blood."<sup>8</sup> Thus, a state's survival is claimed to depend on its material capabilities and alliances with other states. This tenet found its reflection in the theories of Hans Morgenthau and Stephen Walt.

Hans Morgenthau elaborated a balance of power theory. It centers on the idea that equilibrium of power exists on the level of international relations when there is stability between competing forces. In case of war, a state may choose to get engaged either in balancing or bandwagoning behavior.<sup>9</sup> Closely connected to the balance of power theory is the balance of threat theory, worked out by neorealist Stephen Walt. According to Walt, a state's behavior is

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<sup>7</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security* 19, no. 3: 5-49.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Viereck, "The Revolution in Values: Roots of the European Catastrophe, 1870-1952," *Political Science Quarterly* 67, No. 3 (September 1952), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2145162> (accessed April 11, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Ernst B. Haas, "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda," *World Politics* 5, no. 4: 442-477.

determined by the threat it perceives from other states. Walt claims that “under most conditions balancing is far more common than bandwagoning.”<sup>10</sup>

Developing the above mentioned ideas, Bruce Hopper introduces a third alternative for small states that eliminate balancing and bandwagoning from the arsenal of their foreign policy options. Hopper argues that when “the Great Powers prove unable to collaborate on a basis of justice, then neutrality remains an emergency exit for small states.”<sup>11</sup> By committing to neutrality, small states like Sweden kill two birds with one stone. First, they secure their territorial unity and political independence. Second, they serve as buffers between the conflicting sides.

Of peculiar interest is the standpoint of Bengt Sundelius. The Swedish scholar emphasizes that a geo-strategic position of a country plays a decisive role in determining the direction of its foreign policy. Sundelius states that Sweden’s location within the orbits of East-West tensions is the key factor for the country’s decision to adopt a policy of neutrality aimed at securing independence by means of political and military non-alignment.<sup>12</sup>

Analysis of the aforementioned theories belonging to the four major schools of thought has made it possible to come to the following conclusion. Sweden’s foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war can be explained by a unique combination of the country’s historic discourse through the lens of Economist and Realist approaches.

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<sup>10</sup> Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security* 19, no.1: 72-107.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Hopper, “A Case Study in Neutrality,” *Foreign Affairs* 23, no. 3 (April 1945), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20029908> (accessed September 24, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Sundelius, 177.

## THESIS, MODEL, HYPOTHESIS

Analysis of the major schools of thought (Realism, Economism, Revisionism, and Culturalism) has shown that Sweden's foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war can be best explained from the Economist and Realist perspectives. A casual chain of thought can be used to outline the argument:

political and economic interests → foreign policy of neutrality

In this respect, the thesis, the model, and the hypothesis of the research paper are the following:

*Thesis:* Sweden's foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war is dynamic and tailored to secure the state's political and economic interests, should an external threat arise.

*Model:* Political and economic interests  
External Threat → Foreign Policy of Neutrality

*Hypothesis:* The larger the scale of the external threat to Sweden's political and economic interests, the more flexible its foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Having delineated the various schools of thought, which shed light on the reasons for Sweden's preferred choice of neutrality, Economism and Realism have been chosen as most useful approaches for evaluating the hypothesis. In this respect, the research question and the hypothesis are the following:

*Research question:* To what extent does Sweden follow its principles of foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war?

*Hypothesis:* The larger the scale of the external threat to Sweden's political and economic interests, the more flexible its foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war.

### CASE SELECTION

In order to find out the relationship between the variables, two cases will be analyzed, namely: Swedish involvement in the Russo-Finnish War (from 10/1939 to 12/1939) and in the Second World War (the period of German occupation of Denmark and Norway in April-June, 1940). The selection of these time periods is explained by Sweden's geographical position in the epicenter of the war zone and by the desire of the conflicting sides to use Swedish territory to their own advantage.

### DELINEATION AND MEASUREMENT OF CONCEPTS

To establish the relationship between the independent (external threat to Sweden's political and economic interests) and dependent (foreign policy of neutrality) variables, their values should be defined.

To begin with, following the definition of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the external threat to Sweden's political and economic interests will be regarded as an expression of intention to inflict or damage current or future state of affairs in the aforementioned spheres.<sup>13</sup> The operationalization of the variable will be conducted by means of a qualitative context analysis in the following way.

First, the concept of the external threat will be evaluated by the incidence of the emotionally colored vocabulary used in the newspaper articles describing Sweden's domestic and foreign policy. Words having a negative connotation of meaning (see Appendix) will be counted on a monthly basis ( $w_N$ ). Then, their sum ( $\sum w_N$ ) will then be divided by the number of the articles where they have been used ( $N_A$ ). The result will represent the level of threat (T):

$$T = \frac{\sum w_N}{N_A}$$

The closer the ratio is to "1", the closer the level of threat is to being low; if the ratio fluctuates between "2" and "3", the level of threat will be considered moderate; and if the ratio reaches "3", the level of threat will be treated as high.

Second, the definition of neutrality will be borrowed from Harald Wigforss who saw its essence in "impartiality towards military warfare."<sup>14</sup> In order to assess the flexibility of Sweden's impartiality, the notions of positive and negative neutrality will be introduced.<sup>15</sup> Positive neutrality (P+) will be defined as government's abstention from participating in the ongoing

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<sup>13</sup> "Threat," *Merriam-Webster.com*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/threat?show=0&t=1289716395> (accessed November 10, 2010).

<sup>14</sup> Harald Wigforss, "Sweden and the Atlantic Pact," *International Organization* 3, no. 9 (August 1949), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2703569> (accessed November 12, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> William Zartman, "Neutralism and Neutrality in Scandinavia," *The Western Political Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (June 1954), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/442454> (accessed September 24, 2010).

military conflict by either refraining from sending volunteer troops to one of the belligerent states (case one), or by refusing to allow the belligerents to use the Swedish territory for their military purposes (case two). The opposite decisions on the part of the Swedish authorities will be regarded as negative neutrality ( $P^-$ ), i.e. violation of neutrality.

Lastly, Sweden's foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war will be considered stable if the state reacts to the external threat in terms of positive neutrality. Should Sweden break its allegiance to the principles of impartiality, its foreign policy of neutrality will be considered flexible and serving its own interests.

Taking everything into account, the road map to evaluating the thesis can be presented in the following schematic way:

$$P^-/P^+ \leftarrow 1 \geq T > 3 \rightarrow P^-/P^+$$

The source of data is 200 newspaper articles from the New York Times during the periods between 10/01/1939 and 12/31/1939 and between 04/01/1940 and 07/14/1940.

## ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT

At the beginning of the previous century, Sweden strictly followed the principles of neutrality laid out in The Hague Convention of 1907 and the joint neutrality rules that were drawn up by the northern states of Europe at the Stockholm Conference of May 27, 1938.<sup>16</sup> Theoretically, neutrality required a complete balance in the neutral's country relations with the belligerent groups of states.<sup>17</sup> In practice, however, the pendulum of Swedish neutrality swung in the face of danger. In order to assess the relationship between the threat posed to Sweden by the warring blocks and its adherence to the principles of neutrality, two cases will be analyzed. While the first case will focus on Swedish involvement in the Russo-Finnish War, the second one will center on the initial stage of the Second World War.

### THE WINTER WAR

In 1939, Sweden happened to lie athwart the line of war. After months of escalating tension between the Soviet Union and Finland, the Russian air bombardment of Helsinki on November 30, 1939 officially opened the Russo-Finnish War, or the Winter War.<sup>18</sup> Since Finland is an immediate neighbor of Sweden, the prospect of Russian seizure of the Finnish territory is supposed to be perceived by the Swedes as undesirable.

In order to establish the relationship between the dynamics of the external threat (T) and the flexibility of Swedish foreign policy of neutrality (P+ / P<sup>-</sup>), the following steps will be taken:

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<sup>16</sup> Joachim Joesten, "Phases in Swedish Neutrality," *Foreign Affairs* 33, no. 2 (January 1945), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20029898> (accessed December 6, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>18</sup> Hopper, 439.

- I. The external threat (T) will be calculated. To do so, words with a negative connotation of meaning ( $w_N$ ) reflecting the prevailing moods and expectations of the Swedish society during the pre-war (October and November 1939) and war (December) months will be counted. Their sum ( $\sum w_N$ ) will be divided by the number of the articles where they have been found ( $N_A$ ), thus generating the external threat indicator (T).
- II. Levels of the external threat will be determined as follows
  1. If  $T \leq 2$ , the level of threat will be considered low;
  2. If  $3 > T \geq 2$ , the level of threat will be considered moderate;
  3. If  $T \geq 3$ , the level of threat will be considered high.
- III. Neutrality will be evaluated by assessing the values of positive neutrality (P+) and negative neutrality (P<sup>-</sup>).
  4. Neutrality will be considered positive (P+), if Sweden remain impartial and does not assist any of the belligerent sided by sending its volunteers to the battlefields.
  5. Neutrality will be considered negative (P<sup>-</sup>), if Sweden does supply one of the countries at war with its volunteer troops.
- IV. Correlation between positive (P+) and negative (P<sup>-</sup>) neutralities and flexibility of Sweden's foreign policy of neutrality will be set.
  6. Positive neutrality (P+) will be interpreted as an indicator of non-flexibility of Sweden's foreign policy of neutrality.
  7. Negative neutrality (P<sup>-</sup>) will be rendered as an indicator of the flexible character of the Swedish foreign policy of neutrality.

V. The relationship between the dynamics of the external threat (independent variable) and flexibility of Sweden's foreign policy of neutrality (dependent variable) will be established:

8. Positive correlation between the variable will confirm the hypothesis;
9. Negative correlation between the variables will prove the hypothesis wrong.

The results of the analysis are presented can be presented in the table below:

Table 1

Date	External Threat (T)		Neutrality (P)		
	$T = \frac{\sum w_N}{N_A}$	Level of Threat	Number of volunteers sent to Finland	P+	P-
October 1939	1.20	$T < 2 \rightarrow$ low	0		P+
November 1939	3.08	$T > 3 \rightarrow$ high	2,000-5,000		P-
December 1939	2.1	$T > 2 \rightarrow$ moderate	10, 000		P-

As it can be seen from the data, there was a sharp rise of the level of threat in the Swedish society a month before the outset of the Winter War. The increase of the external threat was accompanied by a deployment of an increasing number of volunteers to Finland.

### THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Russo-Finnish peace, signed on March 12, 1940,<sup>19</sup> brought Sweden but a few moments to catch her breath. On April 9, 1940, German troops invaded Denmark and Norway.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> William R. Trotter, *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939-40* (Chapel Hill, CT: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2000), 273.

<sup>20</sup> Joesten, 326.

The Germans wanted to control the two countries bordering on the North Sea (Norway and Finland) as a flank for the intended assault on Britain.<sup>21</sup> The speed of the German advance in Norway, however, was slower than planned, and Germany requested permission to transport arms and munitions across Sweden to Norway. The first request of this kind was made on April 25, 1940, and was followed by a series of “diplomatic moves emphasizing the same point at intervals of a week or so up to June, 1940.”<sup>22</sup>

Since German occupation of Finland presented a challenge to Sweden’s policy security, the hypothesis will be tested during the initial months of the occupation (April-June, 1940).

While the dynamics of the external threat will be defined in the same way as in the first case study (steps one and two), flexibility of Swedish foreign policy will be assessed in terms of Sweden’s response to the German request. Should the Scandinavian non-belligerent permit the passage of the German troops through her territory, neutrality will have a negative value ( $P^-$ ), thus reflecting a flexible nature of the Swedish foreign policy. Refusal to let the Germans cross the country, inversely, will be interpreted positive neutrality ( $P^+$ ), testifying to a stable character of Swedish foreign policy.

The establishment of the relationship between the variables will undergo the same procedure as in the first case.

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<sup>21</sup> Hopper, 441.

<sup>22</sup> Joesten, 326.

Table 2

Date	External Threat (T)		Neutrality (P)		
	$T = \frac{\sum w_N}{N_A}$	Level of Threat	Sweden's response to Germany's request	P+	P-
April 1940	2.20	$T > 2 \rightarrow$ moderate	Refusal		P+
May 1940	2.40	$T > 2 \rightarrow$ moderate	Refusal		P+
June 1940	2.70	$T > 2 \rightarrow$ moderate	Agreement		P-

As the data suggests, there was a gradual increase in the level of threat from April to June, 1940. When the scale of threat reached its peak (2.70) in June, the Swedish government yielded to German pressure and the Transit Agreement was signed in early July, 1940,<sup>23</sup> thus violating the tenets of neutrality.

In sum, a careful analysis of the two cases has indicated that in the face of imminent danger the Swedish government deviated from the neutrality path. In other words, the greater the scale of external threat was, the more flexible Sweden's foreign policy of neutrality became.

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<sup>23</sup> Hopper, 442.

## CONCLUSION

Sweden's foreign policy of freedom from alliance alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war is a highly complex issue which is evaluated by numerous schools of thought. There may perhaps be no one theory that can account for the entire spectrum of Sweden's neutrality, and different paradigms may apply to various time periods and case studies. Realism and Economism consider Sweden's proclamation of neutrality (and lack of its continuity) to be a strategy, employed to satisfy the country's economic and political interests during the two world wars, a tome of "changing geopolitical constellations and economic conditions."<sup>24</sup> During the Cold War, Revisionism explained the swings of Sweden's neutrality by her alleged collaboration with the United States. The post-Cold war era saw the emergence of Culturalism – an approach that ascribed Sweden's homogeneity of population and "exceptionally calm internal political development"<sup>25</sup> to its choice of non-alignment of foreign policy.

After evaluating the dependent and independent variables, Economism and Realism proved to fit the available data best. The Revisionist argument could not be utilized to explain the behavior of Swedish foreign policy in the war-torn Europe of 1939-1940 as the United States was neither involved in the Russo-Finnish war, nor in the German occupation of Scandinavia. As far as Culturalism is concerned, its one-dimensional focus on Sweden's cultural-historic legacy seemed to be insufficient to explain the maneuvers of the Swedish government on the international arena. Since the two selected case studies (the Winter War of 1939-40 and the German occupation of Norway and Denmark of 1940) questioned the ramifications of Swedish

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<sup>24</sup> Malmborg, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Herbert Tingsten, "Issues In Swedish Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 37, no. 3 (April 1959), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20029369> (accessed September 24, 2010).

neutrality, the Realist and Economist perspectives were used while analyzing the character of Sweden's foreign policy of neutrality in a situation of a growing external threat.

In order to establish a link between the scale of external threat to Sweden's political and economic interests and the flexibility of its foreign policy, the concepts of the external threat and flexibility were evaluated in terms of emotionally colored lexica used by the journalists to describe the society's sense of menace emanating from the warring states (independent variable) and Sweden's humanitarian aid and granting transit privileges to belligerent sides (dependent variables). The analysis of the two cases proved the hypothesis: the larger the scale of the external threat to Sweden's political and economic interests, the more flexible its foreign policy of freedom from alliances in peace aiming for neutrality in war.

However, there are limitations to the findings of the research. The lack of data on the cases of concern for this paper, such as access to the Swedish-language sources of information, can question the validity of the evaluation of the external threat. Had more information and resources been available (for example, polls of citizens' opinion, speeches of government officials, or correspondence between the Swedish King Gustav V and the German Chancellor Adolf Hitler), the hypothesis could be confirmed with more confidence.

The conducted research highlights the fact that a country's foreign policy is a multidimensional phenomenon. As Olof Palme said, "A country's foreign policy is not immutable. It is influenced by world's events, by changes of public opinion at home, by the need to take a definite stand on foreign policy issues where previous experiences do not afford sufficient guidance."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> James L. Waite, "The Swedish Paradox: EEC and Neutrality," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 12, no.3 (March 1974), 335.

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APPENDIX

Vocabulary describing neighboring countries	Vocabulary describing current state of affairs	Vocabulary describing expectations of the future state of affairs
Aggressor Attacker Betrayer Dangerous Enemy Foe Formidable Invader Monster Oppress Terrorize Threaten Traitor Tyrannize Unpredictable Unreliable	Alarm Anxiety Concern Despair Dismay Dread Fear Insecure Nightmare Nervous Panic Risky Scare Suspicion Timidity Unease Worry	Anxiety Attack Defend Fatal Hazardous Hurt Jeopardy Menace Protect Risk Threat Trouble