

Swedish neutrality put to

The Swedes fear the increased Russian presence in the Baltic Sea that Nord Stream would bring. They also feel they have nothing to gain by the pipeline. But will they actively try to block a project that the EU has designated as crucial to Europe's energy needs?

| by Reiner Gatermann in Stockholm

Probably in no other country has the Nord Stream project prompted such heated debate as in Sweden - and it is not environmental or economic issues that are taking centre stage. Instead, the focus has been on politics. The dominant theme has been fear of the Russians.

Debate was initially sparked by a newspaper article in mid 2006, in which Krister Wahlbäck, a retired, respected ambassador, professor and expert on security policy, called on Sweden's then social democratic government not to kowtow to the major powers (Russia and Germany) by quietly accepting the gas pipeline which will run through Sweden's economic zone for some 500 km. Wahlbäck asked, 'Does the pipeline project serve any Swedish interests whatsoever?' 'For Sweden', he said, 'the risks increase if we allow a stronger Russian presence on our continental shelf.'

Russia was officially removed from the list of countries which posed a threat to Swedish territory four years ago. Now however, Colonel Stefan Gustafsson, Head of Strategic Analysis and Long Term Planning has stated that, 'Assessing the situation somewhat conservatively, a pipeline that passes so close to Sweden's border is not in

our military interest. We can already detect a larger Russian presence in the vicinity of the Swedish border.' Former Minister of Defence Michael Odenburg adopted a similar tone.

Concern initially centred on the planned compressor platform to be erected approximately 50 km north of the island of Gotland. Speculation was rife that Russia was insisting on the platform to use it as a spy post. After Nord Stream scrapped the platform, opponents argued that it was conceived from the outset as an object to be used for bartering.

If this was so, Nord Stream seems to have succeeded. Carl B. Hamilton, energy policy spokesman for Sweden's Liberal People's Party and leading opponent of the project, now concedes, 'The decision not to erect a platform has significantly reduced security policy concerns.' But frightening rumours keep flying. For example, it was reported in Sweden that the Russian Navy at the behest of Gazprom has surveyed the length of the pipeline without informing Sweden. The company denies this by the way. 'All of our surveys were carried out by Swedish company Marin Mätteknik and none by the Russian Navy', says a spokeswoman.

Power politics |

For Hamilton and other opponents, Nord Stream is 'a direct result of the power politics pursued by Russia vis-à-vis its neighbours'. So far, the Swedish Government has not taken an official position yet. It points out that it is not yet under any obligation to make a decision as the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has yet to be completed. Once the EIA is in place, the government says it will make its judgment in strict keeping with environmental criteria.

Where the current coalition government stands is hard to ascertain. A secret document written last summer is alleged to state that Nord Stream 'is not in Sweden's interest, bringing about no benefits for Sweden, but many disadvantages', primarily in relation to defence and security. Political commentators in Stockholm are of the opinion that the four-party coalition has yet to adopt a unified position, and this is not only because, given the absence of the EIA, no decision has had to be taken. Andreas Carlgren, the Minister responsible, is said to be 'against the pipeline to all intents and purposes'. He is a member of the Centre Party, which has close ties to agriculture. In a press conference called in response to

the test by Nord Stream



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the first Nord Stream application, Carlgren reacted extremely strongly, describing the actions of the consortium as completely unsatisfactory, amateur and almost not worth taking seriously. But at Nord Stream headquarters, a different tone was noted between the official, written response and the press conference.

Obstacle |

It is, however, clear that Sweden could become a difficult obstacle to overcome in terms of the decision process. The country enjoys portraying itself to others as being extremely environmentally aware and could well use the approval process for the pipeline to demonstrate its uncompromising environmental stance. But the question today is whether the Swedes are focusing solely on environmental issues. For Said Mahmoudi, Professor of International Law at the University of Stockholm, 'it is primarily a political not a legal issue whether Sweden intends the block the project or not'. Sweden's relationship with the EU is at stake. Will Sweden want to come out as an opponent to a project that is seen by the EU, with Sweden's backing, as being of paramount importance and essential for European energy supplies, blast the project

out of the water or delay it for years by means of legal challenges? This scenario is unlikely as most experts believe that the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea allows pipelines to be laid on the floor of the Baltic Sea and Sweden would ultimately be able to do nothing to stop this.

An approval process must, however, also comply with the conditions of the Espoo Convention. In this respect, Sweden could find like-minded opponents in enforcing environmental demands, not least in Poland. Here, extensive efforts are being made to push for a land-based pipeline, also on the basis of wanting to protect the Baltic Sea as a biologically sensitive area. But a change in attitude has been detected in Poland since the new government came to power. No one talks about a new Molotov-Ribbentrop plan any more – as the Nord Stream pipeline was described at the time by the former Defence Minister Radoslaw Sikorski. And in diplomatic circles it is said that the climate between Warsaw and Moscow and between Warsaw and Berlin has improved considerably. Nevertheless, Poland is not expected to say 'yes' to the pipeline, but possibly to put up little forcible resistance. Poland is also

considering planning to build a Baltic Sea pipeline itself, as an extension of a pipeline from the Norwegian continental shelf, where Warsaw has bought into a gas field, to Sweden and Denmark. Thus, in Warsaw they have come to the clinical conclusion that, 'We have no means of stopping the project.'

The route to be forged by Sweden therefore remains unclear. According to Dan Svanell, Nord Stream's representative in Sweden, Sweden's objections and arguments are being taken very seriously by Nord Stream, where huge efforts are being made to correctly, objectively and professionally address the issues raised. He describes the dialogue with Stockholm, which is still taking place at civil servant level, as 'good'.

The extent to which domestic policy, foreign policy, security policy or environmental policy will shape Sweden's decision on the Nord Stream project remains to be seen. It has been said in Stockholm that certain powers in the government would find it particularly convenient if a decision did not have to be taken before the next round of parliamentary elections due in autumn 2010. ■