

THE DEFENCE OF FINLAND AND SWEDEN

CONTINUITY AND VARIANCE IN STRATEGY AND PUBLIC OPINION

Charly Saloniuss-Pasternak



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- At state strategic decision-maker and public opinion levels, Swedish defence politics fluctuates more than its Finnish counterpart.
- During the past twenty-five years, different historical experiences and strategic cultures have caused Finland's defence policies to underscore continuity, while Sweden's have revelled in discontinuity.
- The Swedish population now seems to believe that Sweden will be defended together with others, while the Finnish population remains sceptical of even the need for external assistance – especially if it requires a commitment to help defend others in return.



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INTRODUCTION

Finland and Sweden are frequently lumped together in terms of defence policy, because they are not members of a military alliance. Particularly as defence cooperation amongst countries in the region increases, it is important to understand that from the perspective of state decision-maker and public opinion, Swedish defence policy fluctuates more than its Finnish counterpart. During the past twenty-five years, Finland's defence policies have primarily underscored continuity, while Sweden's have revelled in discontinuity. Swedish political decision-makers have twice within two decades changed the orientation of Swedish defence. Swedish public opinion (as measured through both MSB and SOM Institute polls) has also changed quite dramatically during this time period.¹ In contrast, Finnish defence policy and public opinion about it (as measured through the annual ABDI polls) fluctuate considerably less.²

Most interestingly, while Finnish and Swedish official defence policies have shown signs of convergence during the past four years, public opinion in the countries shows some marked differences, particularly when it comes to views on the utility and desirability of military alliances and assistance. These differences suggest that the current period of defence policy consensus between Finland and Sweden may not last. This paper looks at the drivers of Finnish and Swedish security policies, the changes in public opinion and their potential impacts on defence cooperation.

DRIVERS OF DEFENCE POLICY IN SWEDEN AND FINLAND: *ZEITGEIST* AND CONTINUITY

At the strategic level, for about two decades up to 2015, Sweden's political parties oversaw the most ruinous self-disarmament policy in Swedish history. The

wartime strength of the army was reduced by some 95%, the navy and air force both by 70%. Swedish policy-makers dramatically refocused the country's defence policies towards expeditionary operations, with the goal of being able to deploy and support a few all-volunteer battalions in international operations; because they believed that Sweden was not and would not be threatened militarily, and if it were in the future there would be at least a decade's 'strategic warning' enabling it to rearm. The infrastructure required to support national defence efforts was sold or dismantled, operational and total defence planning scrapped, and in 2010 national military service was frozen. Funding decreased consistently from 2.6% of GDP in 1990 to 1% in 2016, preventing any meaningful strategy implementation.

Due to a confluence of events in 2013 and 2014, the Swedish government was forced to acknowledge a dramatic change in the European and Baltic Sea security environment. After a drawn-out public debate, it commanded the country's armed forces to engage in another dramatic reorientation, back towards national defence. With defence minister Peter Hultqvist and Chief of Defence Micael Bydén at the helm, the strategy was shaped during 2015, culminating in what is now known as the 'Hultqvist doctrine'. The short-term aim was to strengthen national defence by using the resources at hand to deliver immediate improvements in operational capabilities. In parallel, an effort to increase regional defence cooperation was continued, particularly with Finland, the United States and NATO. Previous defence ministers, who had pushed for increased Nordic and Finnish-Swedish bilateral cooperation, had laid the groundwork for this increased cooperation, the ultimate purpose of which was for Sweden to be able to 'defend itself with others'. In 2017, conscription was reintroduced after a seven-year hiatus and Sweden held its biggest national defence exercise in two decades, Aurora 17. The rapidity of the above-mentioned changes underlines the ability of the Swedish state to make strategy-level decisions within relatively short time frames. However, as before, there is considerable reluctance to pay for the changed strategy.

1 The Swedish opinion poll data used in this paper can be accessed at: <https://www.msb.se/sv/Kunskapsbank/Statistik--analys/Opinioner--Allmanhetens-syn-pa-samhallsskydd-beredskap-sakerhetspolitik-och-forsvar/> and <https://som.gu.se/undersokningar>.

2 The Finnish opinion poll data used in this paper can be accessed at: https://www.defmin.fi/en/tasks_and_activities/media_and_communications/the_advisory_board_for_defence_information_abdi/bulletins_and_reports.

The ability to rationally implement – and fund – the plans even in the near term is of concern. In March 2018, Swedish Chief of Defence Micael Bydén made it clear that without an immediate decision to add a total of one billion euros to the defence budget, between 2018 and 2021, the already limited territorial defence capabilities of the Swedish military would begin to diminish. The total sums required to build a national defence with a sufficient deterrence threshold have been officially calculated as requiring more than a doubling of the current defence budget of €4.5bn to over €11bn, largely due to the requirement to increase the number of military personnel from around 30,000 (plus 20,000 Home Guard volunteers) to 120,000. The willingness of politicians to agree to such significant increases to the defence budget is from a historical perspective doubtful, especially as the reestablishment of total defence (*totalförsvar*) has been estimated to annually cost an additional €400 million through 2025.

During this same post-Cold War period, Finland has largely continued along the path it has been on since its independence: the military focusing on national defence with the whole of society being involved in protecting the security of the country. The biggest post-Cold War change has been the increasingly deep cooperation with NATO and bilaterally with Sweden and the United States; this has included operational cooperation in international operations in the Balkans, the Middle East and Afghanistan. The primary response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the Baltic Sea region's 'new normal' security environment can be seen in adjustments at the margins and increases to the readiness of the security forces.³

At the level of state strategic decision-making, then, the multiple captains of the Swedish ship of state are deft at navigating through changing defence waters, but also serve as reminders that a ship's captain should not mistake a temporary change in the wind for a permanent change in the weather. Finnish foreign policy leaders could equally be charged with being justifiably proud of the multi-generation effort to build a strong ship, but with being less clear to the passengers under the deck about the severity of the security policy shoals around them. In democracies, the opinions and views of the population are important, if not ultimately determinative.

FINNISH AND SWEDISH PUBLIC OPINIONS DIVERGE ON NATO MEMBERSHIP

Comparing public opinions regarding defence in Finland and Sweden, it is apparent that a number of defence-related views have changed in Sweden, while being generally more stable in Finland. This suggests that public opinion – a key component of democratic decision-making – is more malleable in Sweden than Finland; put differently, in defence matters Swedish opinions seem to be more responsive to domestic and international impulses.⁴

Swedish perspectives on whether or not to seek NATO membership have shown two trends during the past decade. First, overall, opposition to NATO membership has decreased significantly. Between 1997 and 2006 an average of 61% felt Sweden should not seek NATO membership, while the equivalent for 2007 through 2017 was 39%. Support for NATO membership shows a similar if opposite swing. The second notable trend is that support for Swedish NATO membership goes through phases, where support increases, then dips slightly only to begin increasing again, but from a higher level than previously.

In Finland, between 60% and 70% of the population have consistently sought to maintain the status quo, preferring Finland not to seek NATO membership. The most noticeable change during the past decade is an increase in the size of the 'cannot say' or uncertain, most recently accounting for 17% of the population. The contrast with Sweden is notable – in 2017 the ratio of those in Finland supporting membership, opposing it or choosing 'cannot say' was roughly 2:6:2, while in Sweden it was 4:3:2.

Figure 1 shows the clear changes in Swedish views regarding NATO membership, while Finnish views have remained largely consistent. Because ADBI data on joining NATO prior to 2005 is not available, a close proxy has been inserted; whether Finns would like to remain outside of military alliances or seek to join one, it tracks NATO membership opinions, and suggests that Finns see NATO membership as the only genuine option as far as potential alliances to join.

Looking at opinion poll data in a more granular way, per political party affiliation, it is possible to make

3 For more on this, see FIIA Comments 13/2017 'Securing Finland: The Finnish Defence Forces are again focused on high readiness', and 19/2017 'An Effective antidote: the four components that make Finland more resilient to hybrid campaigns'.

4 Extensive defence- and security-related polling is conducted in Finland and Sweden. This paper focuses on defence policy and one of its key aspects for both countries – military non-alliance. This is reflected in the selection of topics from the annual polls conducted by the Finnish Advisory Board for Defence Information, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency and the SOM Institute at the University of Göteborg.

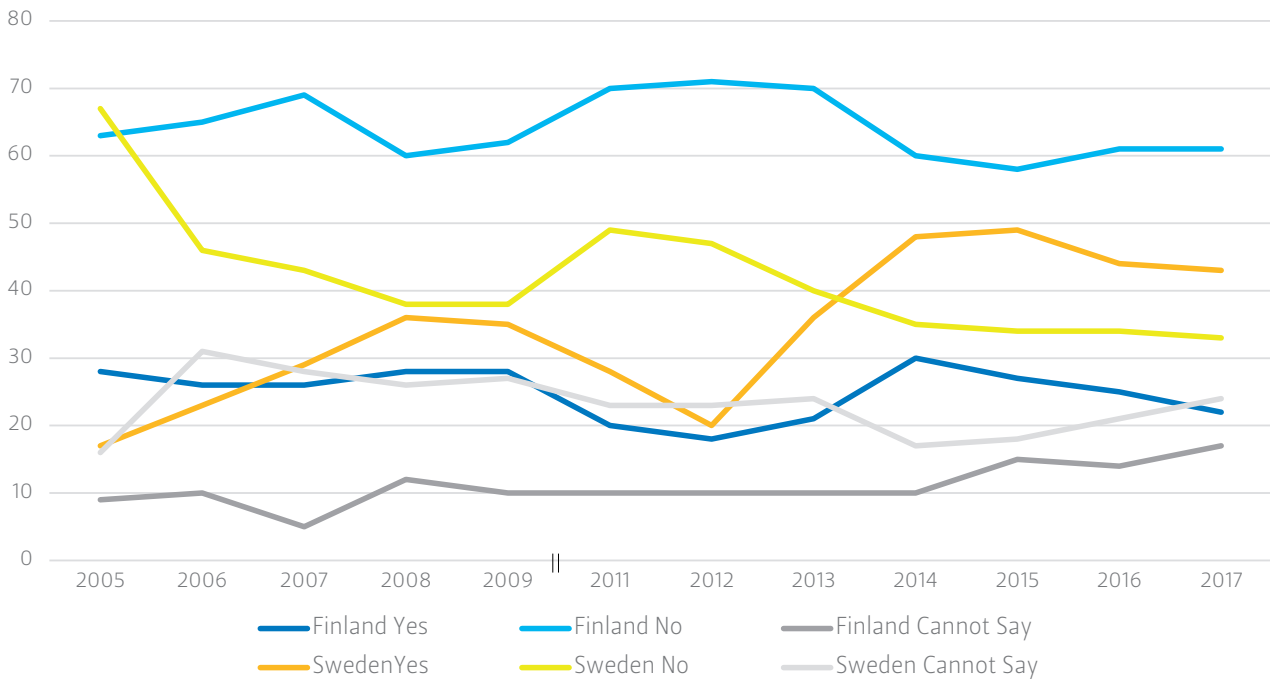


Figure 1. Opinions on whether Finland or Sweden should join NATO.

* Year 2010 is lacking, because the data was not collected in Sweden. Graph: FIIA

some interesting observations, particularly regarding support for or opposition to NATO membership.⁵

Despite increasing evidence to the contrary, the views and position of the social democratic parties in Finland and Sweden are almost unanimously seen as controlling whether any serious move towards seeking NATO membership in either country is made. In Sweden, one in five social democratic party supporters thought Swedish NATO membership was positive in 2016, a slight decrease from the preceding two years' 22%, but statistically more than the 13% to 15% support recorded in the mid-2000s. In Finland, 15% of those identifying themselves as social democratic party supporters think the country should seek NATO membership. This is less than half of the support the idea enjoyed among social democrats in Finland in 2006, when 32% thought Finland should seek membership.

This stranglehold on the 'NATO question' by the social democratic party in Sweden may, however, not be as strong as it has been; not because the party leadership is changing its mind, but because of recent shifts within the centre-right 'Alliance' block (*Alliansen*). All of the *Alliansen* parties now support Swedish NATO

membership, and between 2011 and 2016 there were significant increases in support for NATO membership among those identifying with one of the block's parties. Considering the fact that national military service – long a cornerstone of Swedish defence – was frozen by a narrow 153 to 150 vote in the Swedish parliament, it is not inconceivable that a Swedish government would seek to join NATO without strong support from the social democratic party.

The only Swedish party where there is a clear difference between what the party leadership and its supporters want is the *Sverige Demokraterna*, where 45% of supporters in 2016 were in favour of NATO membership, while the party leadership does not see it currently as a desirable option but may be ready to change depending on public support. This is in stark contrast to their Finnish equivalent conservative-populist party *Perussuomalaiset*, where the leadership over a period of years indicated it was more positively attuned to NATO, while seven out of ten of those identifying as party supporters opposed the idea (73% in 2016).

In Finland, within almost every party grouping, the high watermark of support for NATO membership occurred in 2014 (Centre, Finns, National Coalition, Greens), with the Left Alliance registering a record high 23% support in 2016 and the Social Democrats

⁵ In the case of Finland, the per party data comes from the ADBI/MTS surveys, while for Sweden data from the SOM Institute at Göteborg University is used.



Photo: Louise Levin/Försvarsmakten

seeing 29% support in 2014, a little lower than their peak of 32% in 2006. This could be dubbed the ‘Crimea effect’ and suggests that instinctively Finns across the political spectrum see some potential value in belonging to an alliance, when the spectre of war turns to reality.

As will be discussed below, since 2014 something has convinced Finns of the increasing value of not belonging to a military alliance. What is interesting is that while overall opinions regarding NATO membership in Finland are quite stable, significant variations can be seen over time, in whether supporters of a specific party favour or are against NATO membership. The fact that overall views regarding the desirability of NATO membership are quite stable suggests that voter movement between parties – estimated at around 40–45% of voters in recent parliamentary elections – is responsible for at least some of this dynamic.

SWEDES EXPECT MILITARY ASSISTANCE, FINNS THINK NATO MEMBERSHIP WOULD DECREASE SECURITY

When asked about the impact of EU or (potential) NATO membership, the views of the Finnish and Swedish populations are quite varied. Overall, a Swede is twice as likely as a Finn to see the European Union’s impact on security as being negative. Conversely, 62%

of Finns see that EU membership increases security, while in Sweden only 46% agree.

When asked about the potential impact of NATO membership on national security, three trends emerge: First, an equal number of Swedes see NATO membership as having a positive and negative impact (33% each), with those envisaging a positive impact increasing during the past decade, albeit with a small decrease in support during the past two years. Second, the reverse trend is visible in Finland, with a clear plurality (45% of the population) considering that NATO membership would decrease security. Third, in Sweden, around 10% think membership would have no impact, while about a quarter of the population (26%) in 2017 ‘cannot say’ about the potential impact of membership. In Finland, the numbers are effectively reversed, with some convergence during the past four years between the ‘no impact’ (17%) and ‘cannot say’ (12%) groups.

In terms of future repercussions and changes to Swedish defence policies, the most significant changes in public opinions revolve around the impact on the country of not being militarily allied, and the likelihood of Sweden receiving assistance in the event of being attacked.

Swedes across the board see the impact of not being militarily allied as having changed. In 2011, 57% of Swedes saw not belonging to a military alliance as having a positive impact on Swedish security, 5% saw it as having a negative impact, and 26% as having no

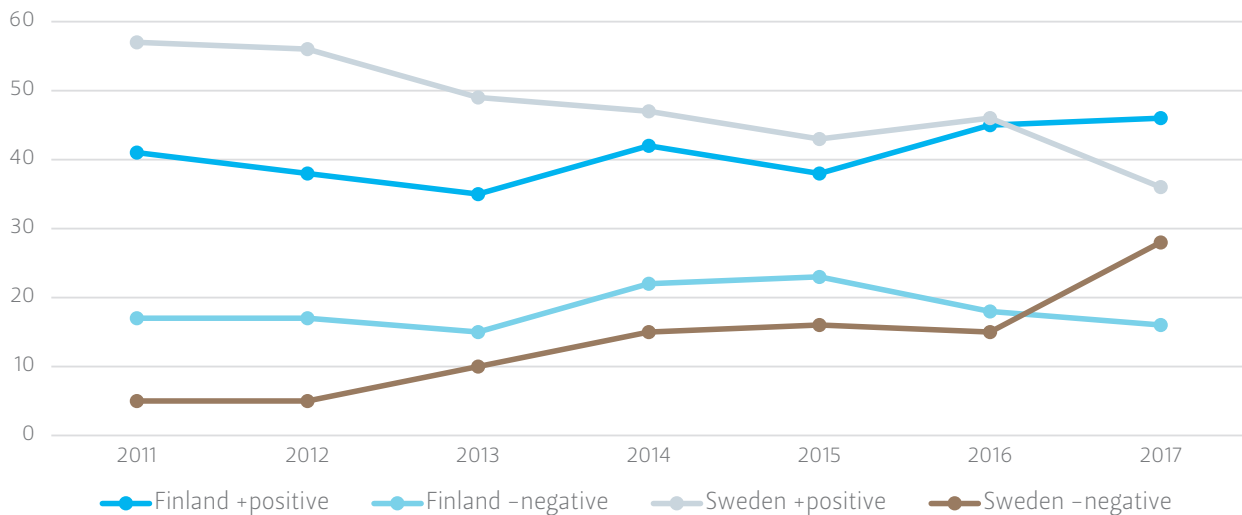


Figure 2. Finnish and Swedish views on whether not being in a military alliance has positive or negative impacts. There is clear convergence in Swedish views regarding the matter, while in Finland, views have been more consistent, remaining within a 10 percentage-point band.

Graph: FIIA

impact. Six years later, in 2017, a dramatic levelling out was observable: 28% now see Sweden’s not being militarily allied as having a negative impact on national security, with 36% still seeing the impact as positive. The proportion of those who cannot say (the uncertain) has increased from 11% to 20%.

The difference to Finland is striking, where a desire to see continuity overrides temporary impulses to make security policy adjustments to a changing security environment. In the same timespan, from 2011 to 2017, the percentage of Finns who see not being militarily allied as having a positive impact on national security has increased from 41% to 46%. Those that see non-alliance as having negative impacts decreased from 17% in 2011 through a high of 23% in 2015 to 16% in 2017. The trends in Finland and Sweden are moving in opposite directions, with Finns consolidating consensus and Swedes becoming ever more open to change – or at least to being guided/persuaded by politicians and world events.

When asked whether Sweden would receive external assistance if attacked, the number of Swedes who think the country would absolutely receive ‘fast and effective assistance’ has decreased from nearly a third, 31% in 2011 to 15% in 2017. In 2017, only 5%, up from 2% in 2011, thought Sweden would not receive assistance. This suggests that Swedes have begun to internalise the message that because Sweden does not belong to a military alliance, assistance is less likely to be forthcoming. Alternatively, it may also reflect some

wishful thinking, as only 13% of Swedes believe that the country is well prepared for a military attack.

In Finland, when the population is asked whether the country is well prepared for a military attack, 75% respond in the affirmative. In both countries, the views on military preparedness have been largely stable over the past decade, but are interestingly not reflected in the will to fight, which is high in both countries. During the past ten years, an average of 72% of Swedes and 74% of Finns have agreed with the statement that, if attacked, the country must defend itself even if the outcome is uncertain.

Looking at a pillar of defence for physically large countries with small populations and an exposed geopolitical position – conscription and national military service – Swedish and Finnish opinions again show divergences and continuity. When the ‘freeze’ of conscription was implemented in 2010, Swedes were divided into three nearly equal-sized groups on whether this was a good idea. Measured by the SOM Institute in 2010, 35% thought conscription should be reintroduced, 33% considered that it was a bad idea, and 32% had no strong feelings on the matter. A clear change occurred between 2011 and 2013, continuing through 2016, when 62% thought the reintroduction of conscription was a good idea, while only 14% thought it was a bad idea. In Finland, support for national military service has averaged 74%, with recent lows of 63% in 2010–2011 – coinciding with changes in Sweden – and a current high of 81% support for the

contemporary system, and another 9% supporting a more selective intake for military service.

If the number of Swedes who think Sweden will absolutely receive fast and effective assistance in the case of a military attack has decreased to 15%, a plurality of 44% still think that it is quite likely that Sweden will receive fast and effective aid. This apparent paradox may be explained by the contradictory messages the Swedish population has received during the past four years. On the one hand, NATO's Secretary General has stated unequivocally that Sweden cannot expect assistance from the Alliance, a message echoed by defence ministers from regional NATO member states. On the other hand, NATO's reliance on Sweden in the event of Article 5 collective defence operations in the region has become a widely accepted axiom, and signals from consecutive US administrations, especially from Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of Defence James Mattis, have suggested that Sweden (and Finland) would be aided.

Taken together, the data suggest that the Swedish population's views on matters relating to alliances are shifting and are quite flexible – in contrast to the conventional wisdom that 'Swedish neutrality' has become an integral part of the national identity. The fact that nearly six in ten Swedes (59%) assume that fast and effective external assistance is absolutely or quite likely to arrive in the event of a military attack suggests that there are few qualms about accepting foreign assistance.

This is in stark contrast to Finland, where 75% of the population believe that the country is well prepared for a military attack; the public national security narrative is built on the myth that Finland has never received military assistance, and the famous exhortation inscribed at the King's Gate on Suomenlinna: 'Posterity, stand your ground and do not rely on foreign assistance'. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the population seem to have responded to the guiding hand of the country's foreign policy establishment and the consensus it has sought to solidify during the past three years. During that time, led by President Sauli Niinistö, the majority elite opinion has shifted to a view that Finland must not seek NATO membership now but should retain the option to do so (if prodded to do so through Russian behaviour, or potential Swedish accession). The fact that Finland continues to feel the need to reiterate its sovereign right as an independent country to seek NATO membership is indicative of the instrumental way that the 'NATO

membership option' is used in Finnish domestic and foreign policy vis-à-vis Russia.

The historical relationship between Finnish and Swedish defence policies is frequently cited as a reason why both countries must keep each other abreast of any intention to seek NATO membership, and should if necessary also join the organisation at the same time. Both Finnish and Swedish studies on the subject have arrived at these recommendations. A part of this process must be to keep each other abreast of the changes that public opinion is undergoing in both countries.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Over time, in a democracy, the resources spent on maintaining and developing national defence capabilities are a reflection of political perspectives regarding war and its likelihood. In Sweden, politicians reacted within a decade to the 'end of history' (and by extension war against Sweden) zeitgeist, possibly with more vigour than expected, because the changes aligned with political ideologies and deeply held national values such as peace and global solidarity.

Their Finnish counterparts are less likely to be convinced by apparent changes, preferring to rely on a limited set of guiding principles and minimal risk-taking when making defence policy decisions. This strategic culture of emphasising slow marginal changes meant that no major changes were made by the time the security environment began to deteriorate in Europe.

This recent history suggests that investments in Swedish defence are relatively dependent on external negative events and the maintenance of domestic public pressure, while Finnish defence investments fluctuate less, with World War II and Cold War experiences serving as 'cultural signifiers' that moderate the impact of different government coalitions on defence budgets and preparations.

The foreign policy decision-makers in both countries have to contend with the reality that the publics of the two countries respond differently to the changing security environment, and while they may be able to be led, politicians must remain responsive to their domestic voters' changing views on how best to arrange the defence of each country. The Swedish population now seems to believe that Sweden will be defended together with others, while the Finnish population remains sceptical of even the need for external

assistance – especially if it requires a commitment to help defend others in return.

It is these marked differences in key parameters relating to defence, and the tendency of Swedish political parties to behave like weather vanes regarding defence that leads to the conclusion that Swedish defence policy fluctuates considerably more than its Finnish equivalent. Being more responsive to the zeitgeist implies that future changes could occur in multiple directions. However, at present there is analytically little to suggest that without external events, the trends visible in opinion polls would change dramatically.

The implications for bilateral Finnish–Swedish defence cooperation vary. Finnish politicians have been open to the idea of a binding defence agreement, while Swedish ones have not, but if public opinion continues to change as it has, even Swedish politicians may come to similar conclusions as their Finnish counterparts. The fact that a clear majority of Swedes expect assistance is likely to give Swedish politicians leeway in terms of deepening cooperation with the United States. Moreover, the fact that fewer now see military non-alliance as having positive benefits may have similar impacts regarding deepening cooperation with NATO. From Finland’s perspective, one clear conclusion is that unpredictability is likely to continue on core issues relating to the context in which Finnish defence should prepare to operate, that being Sweden’s behaviour regarding how to prepare for its defence. This may begin to impact bilateral cooperation between the two countries. /