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BOOK REVIEW

Wilhelm Agrell
Bakom Ubåtskrisen
Liber Förlag, Stockholm, 1986
231 pp.

Wilhelm Agrell, a highly competent researcher both in issues of war and issues of peace, has written an important book: The Background For The Current Submarine Crisis In Swedish Waters. I think the word to be underlined in the title is the word Bakom. The book is actually not that much about the current submarine crisis starting 27 October 1981 when the Soviet submarine U137 was lying high and dry in rather sensitive waters outside a major Swedish marine base; whatever was the reason, whatever was the motive.

Agrell's book gives us the background not only for diplomacy and political and military incidents in the whole area, but also some of the theory of non-alignment and neutrality, particularly in Swedish history. I find both aspects fascinating, and would perhaps particularly direct the reader's attention to the description of the almost incredible incursion into Soviet territory by the United States 28 - 29 April 1954 (pp. 109 - 115). That a number of US planes simply flew over Swedish territory and far into the Soviet Union (Novgorod, Kalinin, Smolensk) must have been a shock to the Soviet Union, of the kind that would make them reconsider quite a lot of their military thinking.

A very strong point in Agrell's book is his description of the images held by the two parties to the cold war of each other

in the military situation and how these images are adjusted. Agrell does the same for Swedish images, and presents his own image of how these images relate to each other. A fascinating exercise, although one could ask Agrell to be more generous in giving the reader some hints about his own super-image. But Agrell is careful, stays close to the data.

In one sense this is both the strength and a weakness of the book. The reader will find in the rich and comprehensive notes all the references he wants, but will look in vain for more far-reaching hypothesis about what is currently going on. At this point Agrell's conclusions are actually relatively tame: the final chapter, where Agrell tries to explain the submarine crisis and comment on it is the weakest chapter in the book. The data basis is actually very meager. As the author ~~points~~ out himself: the premise for any conclusion is that the submarines really are Soviet submarines. It may be, may be also not. Norwegian submarine hunting was able to force up to the surface a French submarine, Le Redoutable--a point not supposed to be mentioned in the Norwegian debate. At the same time it is very well known that the United States no longer considers these waters Soviet territory but, rightly or wrongly, make their presence felt, for instance in the large scale maneuver in November 1985 where the battleship Iowa also took place. The armament level was heavy: cruise missiles were included. Actually, another Swedish researcher, Ola Thunander has perhaps this perspective more developed than Agrell.

On the other hand, U137 was certainly a Soviet submarine. But from this it does not follow (Agrell p. 211) that this clear breach of Swedish neutrality is related to war planning against (my italics) Sweden. Military action can take place in Swedish waters without being directed against Sweden. The Soviet Union might be interested in exploring hiding places, perhaps also preparing logistically for naval warfare in the Baltic Sea, not from their own coasts but also using the Swedish coasts. They might be interested in positioning submarines in Swedish waters as a more invulnerable deployment for launching missiles, intermediate range or inter-continental, but not against Sweden. Of course, they could be demolished wherever they are, by US or by Swedish or by joint ^{forces} operations. But the Soviet Union could use trip wire strategies, announcing that any effort to destroy their missile carrying submarines would trigger a nuclear explosion and that the attacker would have to at least share the responsibility. Would Sweden, or the US trigger a nuclear explosion wiping out Stockholm? Perhaps US, but Sweden?

Speculations; like the speculations in Agrell's book. At any rate, it is difficult in Agrell's book to find a clearly developed linkage theory relating US strategies in the Kola area and the Baltic Sea with the Soviet strategies in the same areas. To me it looks like both sides are overstepping self-imposed restrictions in earlier periods in the cold war (with notable exceptions such as April 1954), with escalation following, at the expense of two small countries, Sweden and Norway. Our position is more threatened than ever. In a sense that is the basic issue of Agrell's book - soberly arrived at. I agree wholeheartedly; but the causal complex is in the total East-West system, and is not a simple chain linking Sweden and the Soviet Union only. Moreover, Sweden is not that innocent, as Agrell says.

And what this means, I guess, was best comprehended and expressed by Olof Palme; the solution lies in the general reduction of East-West tension, and that today depends on star wars, not on submarines. And that, in turn, today depends on the US more than on the Soviet Union. And perhaps on Swedish, and Norwegian, ability to articulate our concern with what to many seems to be a new generation of incredibly offensive weaponry, laser beams, coming in to replace the highly impractical nuclear arsenal on which the two parties have been depending so far. . . [In that giant game submarines in Swedish waters are small fish indeed. Agrell is to be complimented for not doing what I have just done, escaping out, into outer space, but for staying close to the floor, in fact to the ocean floor - letting us feel the full and chilling impact of what may be taking shape along the Swedish coast.

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