

Scandinavia in a Fractured Globalized World

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What was once thought of as an unstoppable march towards a homogeneous, globalized world has been called into question by two recent events: the decision of Britain to leave the EU, or Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump as president of the US. I feel that the Scandinavian/Nordic countries have an opportunity to not only mitigate the harmful economic and political effects of Brexit and a Trump presidency, but also to offer an alternative to the type of closed societies these two formerly, outward looking nations seek to create. Both the election of Trump and the Brexit referendum can be seen as reactions to the inequalities created by contemporary globalization. However, retreating within one's borders and refusing to actively promote reform policies to deal with these issues is not the way to solve these problems. The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the ways the Scandinavian/Nordic countries can fill the gap after the retreat of Britain and the US within their borders and contribute to making globalization something that benefits all people instead of a small minority.

Although chronologically coming after the Brexit referendum, one can argue that the unexpected victory of Trump in the 2016 US presidential election has had a greater impact on the world than the British decision to leave the EU. Both Trump's election (by a minority of voters) and some of his subsequent decisions have radically redefined what we mean by globalization and how it can be used to tackle serious transnational problems such as climate change and social justice. His criticism of NATO and his withdrawal of the US from the Paris Accord on climate change during his first, much advertised trip to Europe in the spring of 2017, a hundred days after his presidency had begun, further evidenced his decision to make America great again by isolating it from the world community and reducing it to a second-rate economy dependent on fossil fuel energy and antiquated technology.

A few months prior to Trump's election, Britain delivered its own shock to globalization when, by a small majority, British voters decided on June 23, 2016 to leave the EU. Britain had always had a complicated relationship

with the EU, not least during Margaret Thatcher's time in office. In a misguided effort to enhance his own political position and silence the Eurosceptics of his own party, the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron decided to hold a referendum on this divisive issue; always feeling that a majority of voters would decide to remain within the EU. The opposite turned out to be the case. Immediately following this surprise defeat, Cameron resigned from office, despite repeated pledges he would remain leader of the country, regardless of the outcome of the referendum.

This situation was made worse when the new prime minister - Theresa May - following a bitter and divisive leadership contest - called a snap general election a year later on June 8, 2017. Her intention was to increase the Conservative majority in the House of Commons. As we know, the exact opposite was the result, with the Conservative Party losing its majority and being forced to rely on the not entirely reliable Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to get through legislation. Prime Minister May's attempt to create what she liked to call a 'strong and stable' government so it could negotiate with the EU from a position of strength was in shambles, and what Britain's relation in the future would be to Europe and indeed the rest of the world was made increasingly uncertain.

Thus, within the space of a year, two countries that liked to describe themselves as world leaders had retreated from the world scene and decided it would be best to go it alone. How can Scandinavia take advantage of these recent changes to enhance its own position in the world and at the same time contribute to creating a globalized world that benefits the many instead of the few? In a variety of ways I think Scandinavia can make a difference. Let us look at some.

One can be as functioning as a 'model' society; both in the sense of a model to emulate but also and perhaps more importantly in the sociological sense of a model to be tested. A number of Scandinavian features contribute to this: a strong belief in democracy and the peaceful resolution of conflicts, a recognition that extremes of wealth are not good for the economy or society, the promotion of gender equality, and the importance of the environment. In addition to these qualities, the Scandinavian/Nordic countries can boast a high quality and innovative educational system, and a highly skilled and adaptable labor force.

I do not see Sweden, where I have lived and worked for most of my adult life, or Scandinavia as constituting a 'utopia'; but I do think that whatever weaknesses and shortcomings these countries have, the way they have dealt with social and economic issues contrasts favorably with the enormous social problems faced today by the US and Britain and the shared inability of these two former world leaders to face up to the domestic challenges they face.

Ironically these are the two countries Scandinavians in general and Swedes in particular have been brought up to admire and respect.

Besides serving as role models the Scandinavian/Nordic countries can benefit themselves and help compensate for the US and Britain retreating within their borders. As mentioned above, one of Trump's many controversial decisions was to withdraw the US from the Paris Accord on climate change in 2017. One of the negative consequences of this was that US funding to developing countries to implement climate change programs would be discontinued¹. Scandinavian/Nordic countries individually and collectively have the skills, expertise, and money to fill this gap and by doing so contribute to combating climate change.

In a similar way, Scandinavian/Nordic countries can take advantage of the increasingly restrictive immigration controls that the US under Trump is already implementing and Brexit Britain would like to implement. The mutual desire of the US and Britain to keep people out has made these countries less attractive for people to come to work and study. The Scandinavian/Nordic countries can both benefit themselves and help the rest of the world by providing high quality, university education and research opportunities for students from abroad, as well as jobs in new high tech industries. Canada has already taken advantage of this and now runs an aggressive and successful recruitment campaign to get high tech workers to come to Canada². There is no reason why the Scandinavian/Nordic countries cannot do the same.

Another way in which the Scandinavian/Nordic countries can make a difference is in the much needed field of international peace efforts. The number of Scandinavian politicians and public figures who have mediated in international conflicts or have spoken out against injustices in the world is quite noteworthy. These include such people as Martti Ahtisaari, the former Finnish prime minister and UN special envoy for Kosova who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008; Gro Harlem Brundtland, three-term Norwegian prime minister, UN special envoy on climate change, and head of the so-called Brundtland Commission which prioritized the need for countries to pursue environmentally sustainable economic development; and last but not least, Dag Hammarskjöld, second secretary-general of the United Nations, who did much to define the administrative and diplomatic role of the general-secretary and the peace-keeping powers of the United Nations. The list could be made longer. It would seem that living in a region that has a long history of being aware of how dependent it is on the political and economic activities of other countries produces a type of statesman that is in high demand today. It certainly contrasts strongly with the lack of statesmanship we see in US president Donald Trump and the British foreign secretary, Boris Johnson. Both of these individuals display a lack of expertise and experience in foreign affairs that not

only is detrimental to their own respective countries, but also is dangerous for the entire world.

Lastly the Scandinavian/Nordic countries have geopolitical importance. This can be seen in two ways: their strategic importance militarily and their relation to the Arctic region. Hitler's Germany recognized the strategic importance of this region during World War II and in the Cold War it became a buffer between the US and the Soviet Union. The region has received renewed interest due to Putin's aggressive foreign policy and his willingness to use military means to achieve political ends.

One way for the Scandinavian/Nordic countries to meet this new threat is of course for each country to create a strong military of their own and cooperate with or join NATO. Norway and Denmark are already members of NATO; Sweden, Iceland and Finland are not. Sweden is not a member due to its longstanding policy of neutrality, although periodically strong voices are raised in Sweden to join NATO. Finland has a complicated history with Russia and shares a 1,300 kilometer border with it. Iceland has always been aggressively anti-NATO. Putin's recent remarks that Russia would see a possible Swedish membership in NATO as a threat to be 'eliminated' is a reminder of the military-strategic importance of this region and how easily it can be turned into a scene of battle³.

Even though it can be argued that military preparedness is the best way to counter Russian aggression, there might be another, perhaps complementary, way. More likely than a direct attack on Scandinavia, is the gradual destabilization of the Baltic countries by Russia with a subsequent military attack. This is a pattern we recognize from other areas in the world where Russia either sees its 'sphere of influence' threatened, such as in the Ukraine, or in places where it wishes to expand its political and economic interests, as in the Middle East. In both these cases, it seems Putin only intervenes militarily in countries with weak social structures. The recently independent Baltic countries are vulnerable in this respect. Rather than a military buildup, a better defense might be to strengthen the Baltic societies so they can better resist destabilization by Russia followed by military intervention. This kind of non-military assistance can easily be provided within the existing framework of Nordic-Baltic cooperation⁴.

The geopolitical importance of the Scandinavian/Nordic countries is also seen in their relation to the Arctic region. As Greenpeace points out; the region is more impacted by global warming than any other place in the world. Melting ice and rising sea levels are immediate concerns and threaten countries regardless of ideology⁵. Even before the budding friendship between Putin and Trump, international oil companies had invested heavily in exploiting oil deep in Arctic waters. This will only intensify as both Trump, with his strong ties to

the US oil industry, and Putin pursue aggressive measures to exploit fossil fuels as much as possible. It is more important than ever that the Arctic region not be subjected to a wild west, last world frontier energy rush.

An important body that can help do this is the Arctic Council. The Council which was founded in 1996 and lists its member states as Canada, which founded the Council, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Island, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Russia, and the US. In addition international organizations representing Arctic indigenous people have permanent representative status. The Council is the leading intergovernmental forum promoting cooperation, coordination and interaction among the Arctic states. And although it is a forum for discussion and as such cannot use force to implement its policies, it can still play an important role in both preserving the fragile nature of the region and promoting policies to stave off climate change disaster.

Changes on the global stage are taking place faster than we could have imagined a year ago and the election of Donald Trump and Britain's decision to leave the EU can be seen as catalysts bringing these changes about. However, what happens in the future will not depend on what happens in the US and/or Britain. The world has moved on. Instead we are heading towards an unpredictable, fluid, and rapidly changing global world. This will be the new normal. As this happens new countries of importance will emerge on the world stage and others will retreat. China is already taking advantage of this newly created situation. I see no reason why the Scandinavian/Nordic countries cannot do the same. Scandinavia would benefit and so would the rest of the world.

Footnotes:

1. Brad Plumer, "What to Expect as U. S. Leaves Paris Climate Accord", *The New York Times*, June 1, 2017. Online.
2. Ashifa Kassam, "Canada calling: tech industry lures workers north in wake of Trump", *The Guardian*, 4 June 2017. Online.
3. David Charter, "Putin warns Sweden not to join NATO", *The Times*, June 6, 2017. Online.
4. Especially the overlapping Nordic-Baltic Eight regional cooperation format; but also through cooperation run by the Nordic Council of Ministers.
5. Greenpeace, "Save the Arctic", accessed May 13, 2017, <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/campaigns/climate-change/artic-impacts/>.