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The makings of a moral superpower: Swedish good international citizenship as middle-power nation brand

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ABSTRACT

Sweden has consistently performed positively in global assessments of its nation brand and its contributions to global order. A testament to a century of agile image construction, Sweden's 'moral superpower' branding has evolved in recent decades to encompass ideals of the 'good international citizen' that continue to elevate its status amongst middle powers. Despite Sweden's moral record being imperfect, this article examines the reasons and methods behind Sweden's overwhelming successes in political nation branding, asking whether these strategies are still viable into the mid-twenty-first century. The article frames Sweden's moral nation brand through the concept of the good international citizen, which is identified as an integral component of effective middle power strategy in the contemporary international system. As recent geopolitical events have forced Sweden to reconsider its foreign policy objectives and align with more realist, hard power agendas, it argues that of leaning into the good international citizen as normative/behavioural nation branding is required to bridge the gap between Swedish imagery and reality.

KEYWORDS

Sweden; soft power; middle power; nation branding; good international citizen

Introduction

In indices measuring global perceptions of national brands and reputation, such as the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Branding Index (NBI), Sweden consistently appears in the top ten (see Figure 1 below), indicating that it has a cohesive nation brand attractive to international society and markets. In the Good Country Index (GCI), Sweden has not only consistently been assessed as in the global top ten but has also achieved first ranking in three of the five available versions since the index began in 2014 (see Figure 3 below). As an index that seeks to assess states' performance in policy areas with normative value in the international system, such as world order, peace, and equality, the GCI in effect assesses Sweden's performance as a 'good international citizen' (GIC). The notion of being a good international citizen, often associated with middle power politics in the

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international system, has been integrated effectively with Sweden's 'moral superpower' nation brand, whereby the Swedish state has self-identified as an exceptionally activist moral force, 'a natural role model in the international community [that takes] it upon itself to act as a guide to other actors in the system' (Dahl, 2006, p. 895). In recent decades, Sweden has built on these foundations to enhance its global reputation as a liberal, feminist, humanist, and morally-progressive welfare state whose values permeates both its domestic and international politics (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Becker-Jakob et al., 2013; Brysk, 2009; Skilbrei, 2021).

However, Sweden's 'exemplary' moral image has been criticised as a thin veneer that obscures the realities of a complex, pluralist society. Sweden is currently grappling with rising waves of populism and xenophobia in response to recent migrant crises, takes a selective view of its history, particularly around wartime neutrality and eugenics, its treatment of Sámi, Roma and other minorities, and the state's environmental impacts are often inconsistent with their message of environmental consciousness (Bryant, 2023; Hivert, 2022; Raoul Wallenberg Institute, 2022; Sanandaji, 2018; Tomson, 2020; Trägårdh, 2018). Behind these domestic and foreign policy challenges, Sweden also faces an increasingly bipolar and anti-globalising geopolitical situation, as evidenced by growing tensions between the USA and China, the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Swedish NATO-membership, and a global paradigmatic shift (Alberque & Schreer, 2022; Men et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2021; Savolainen, 2024).

This article seeks to explain how and why Sweden has been so successful in crafting an overwhelmingly positive international image through nation branding strategies and asks whether these strategies are still viable into the mid-twenty-first century. This discussion is framed through the concept of the good international citizen, which is identified as an integral component of effective middle power strategy in the contemporary international system. It argues that the Swedish approach to middle power politics occurs at the intersection of normative and behavioural models as its normative values inform strategic behaviours. When combined with Sweden's soft and smart power strategies, this intersection between the normative and behavioural informs an effective nation branding tactic that reinforces Sweden's status, power, and influence within the international system. It then applies this framework to analyse the historical development of the Swedish nation brand since the 1950s, illustrating how it has been deployed and altered strategically over time to maintain a positive image for the benefit of the Swedish nation, both domestically and internationally. As recent geopolitical events have forced Sweden to reconsider its foreign policy objectives and align with more realist, hard power agendas, it ends by arguing that Sweden must continue to utilise the good international citizen framework as a normative/behavioural nation branding to reconcile Swedish values and its geopolitical realities.

Middle power strategies: soft power and good international citizenship

As the name suggests, middle powers exercise neither great nor small power in the international system, but most share a 'propensity to promote cohesion and stability in the world system' (Jordaan, 2003, p. 165). In their typology of middle powers, Cooper et al. (1993) identify four approaches to defining middle powers: position (relative status to great and small powers), geography (geographically located between great powers),

normative (greater moral status compared to either great or minor powers), and behavioural (characterised by different styles of behaviour in international politics). They identify the behavioural as the most useful for their purposes and critique the normative for its smugness, its exclusion of many other states that otherwise exhibit middle power attributes, and its failure to adequately explain some foreign policy decisions (Cooper et al., 1993, p. 19). Patience (2014) offers three conceptualisations of his own: the Concert of Europe model (a broadly realist approach that focuses on the alignment of smaller powers with bigger powers, or coalition-building), the regionalist (the cultivation of regional groupings to address interests enabling greater influence in the international system than afforded by acting alone), and the neo-Kantian (a behavioural model with normative undertones). Within the behavioural definition, Efstathopoulos (2018) identifies three major preferences that define middle power behaviour: projecting good international citizenship, seeking multilateral solutions to global problems, and alleviating instability in global affairs via crisis management initiatives. These are generally achieved through three strategies: niche diplomacy, intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership, and coalition-building (Efstathopoulos, 2018).

Furthermore, the concept of the 'good international citizen' (GIC) is core to the behavioural definition of middle powers – indeed, Abbondanza (2021, p. 190) suggests that 'there cannot be a "quintessential" middle power that is not a good international citizen at the same time'. The Australian foreign minister (1988–1996) Evans' (1989) initial formulation of the GIC concept established its key characteristics of 'enlightened self-interest', humanitarianism, and cosmopolitan values. Others have since characterised GICs as 'global do-gooders' (Lawler, 1992), states whose diplomacy is aimed at 'ameliorating the "common weal"' (Nossal, 1999, p. 99), a 'strategy of the third way' between realism and cosmopolitanism (Wheeler & Dunne, 1998, p. 853), and 'civilising agents' in international society (Shapcott, 2020, p. 246).

Such descriptions emphasise the normative undertones of the GIC concept. As Nossal (1999, p. 100) explains, a key part of GIC is 'to convince others to alter their behaviour'; but, more specifically, it is to convince others to adopt a more cosmopolitan and humanitarian mindset. Patience's (2014) conceptualisation of the neo-Kantian middle power imagining further supports Abbondanza's argument for the intersection between middle powers and GIC by emphasising these cosmopolitan ideals. Importantly, Patience's neo-Kantian model also highlights the role of soft and smart power for assisting middle powers to accrue and wield influence.

The concept of soft power first emerged as one of the new models for understanding the shifting power dynamics of the post-Cold War era (Nye, 1990). Nye (1990, p. 154) observed that,

> Traditionally the test of a great power was its strength in war. Today, however, the definition of power is losing its emphasis on military force and conquest that marked earlier eras. The factors of technology, education, and economic growth are becoming more significant in international power, while geography, population, and raw materials are becoming somewhat less important.

In this new system of power in world politics, Nye predicted that 'soft' techniques of attraction and co-option rather than hard, coercive strategies would be key, identifying culture, political values, and policies as three core resources for developing soft power.

Importantly, Nye characterised this new era in world politics as one that enabled a diffusion of power toward smaller nations and other non-state actors. With its emphasis on the attractiveness of values and policies, soft power becomes an important resource for establishing international norms that align with the wielding state's own values. Furthermore, establishing such norms becomes a further display of (soft) power and enables smaller-than-great powers to influence international standards, even in traditional realms of hard power, such as global security (Carlson-Rainer, 2017).

Although soft power is generally desirable to assist all states in achieving their foreign policy objectives, it offers middle and smaller powers avenues for international influence. These avenues for generating international influence may be not only easier to attain but also more desirable to achieve than traditional hard power resources, such as military might and economic dominance (Kahler, 1998). Cooper and Parlar Dal (2016) locate the second of three waves of middle power diplomacy as coinciding with the end of the Cold War, which precipitated an international environment wherein soft power politics and middle power diplomacy could both proliferate, with the former being a useful tool for the latter. They identify a 'powerful normative culture on rights and responsibilities' (Cooper & Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 517) and specify the classic post-Cold War middle power role as acting as 'conscious and able agents of management of the global system' (Cooper & Parlar Dal, 2016, p. 520). In a further confluence of ideas, GIC also appears in this era, with Evans (1989, p. 12) highlighting its importance for emerging international interdependence and growing globalist ideals.

Good international citizenship also becomes an important way for some states, such as Sweden, to accrue significant normative power in the international system. As Hall (1997, p. 594) explains, 'Moral authority acquires utility as a power resource when it becomes socially embedded in a system of actors whose social identities and interests impel them to recognise it was a power resource'. This, in turn, lends itself to a further new typology of power, the pinnacle of which is the 'moral superpower'. Dahl (2006, p. 897) defines a moral superpower as 'an actor engaged in pursuing an active foreign policy' that is also activ*ist*, internationalist, harmony-oriented, and almost evangelical in its mission to better the world. A moral superpower, Dahl concludes, 'feels an obligation to tell the world what to do, and how. For this task, it considers itself exceptionally and uniquely qualified' (2006, p. 898). Importantly, being an actual superpower – usually determined by immense hard power resources – is not a prerequisite for being a *moral* superpower; indeed, it could also be argued that being a superpower in the contemporary international system often requires significant moral compromises. Moral authority provides smaller states with an additional potential power resource important within multilateral internationalism. Sweden is considered the original moral superpower, although Canada, Norway, and the Netherlands are also recognised as contenders (Dahl, 2006).

This article locates the Swedish approach to middle power politics as occurring at the intersection of normative and behavioural definitions of middle power, thus falling into Patience's neo-Kantian model, because of the way normative values inform strategic behaviours. This in turn solidifies the link between middle powers and GIC established by Abbondanza. Furthermore, this intersection between the normative and behavioural and use of soft and smart power strategies can be understood as a nation branding tactic that reinforces status, power, and influence within the international system, enhancing their further designation as a moral superpower. Being a good international citizen

becomes not just a foreign policy objective but also an important part of the national image projected to the world, and vice versa.

Brand GIC: constructing a nation brand via global values

Nation branding describes the process of building and managing a nation's image and reputation to improve its standing internationally. According to Dinnie (2008, p. 5), a nation brand is 'the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all its target audiences'. This definition, Dinnie argues, acknowledges the nation brand as a multifaceted construct while also recognising the role of perception and the plurality of audiences. Cohesive nation branding serves a clear economic function, as it is often used to attract tourists and drive goods exports, but it is also tied to effective public diplomacy and the accrual of soft power resources through the projection of a cohesive image of the nation, its ideas, and its values. Anholt (2011) also suggests that a state's concern for its reputation is indicative of its interest in global community participation and its desire to promote economic and cultural opportunities for its citizens.

Projecting a positive image through a nation branding strategy can effectively assist a country to gain soft power (Ji, 2024; Kahraman, 2017) and influence perceptions of a nation's status in the international system. Ayhan's (2019) analysis of South Korea's projection of a middle power identity found that this was largely the result of its nation branding efforts rather than foreign policy behaviour. However, Anholt (2011, p. 289) cautions that 'the notion that a country can simply advertise its way into a better reputation has proved to be a pernicious and surprisingly resilient one'. He identifies three processes in enhancing a country's reputation and brand: strategy, substance, and symbolic actions. In other words, the branding strategy needs to be executed through purposeful innovation and action across multiple sectors to provide the substance of the desired identity. Accordingly, Ayhan (2019) emphasises that projecting this identity establishes external expectations about a middle power's behaviour and actions in the international system to substantiate the claims to this status made by the branding efforts. Through such branding, a middle power state can transform its place in the typology from a positional middle power to one that is located more within the behavioural and normative dimensions, perhaps indicating the desirability of those dimensions within the international community.

Given its economic and political utility, various metrics have emerged to measure the success of nation branding tactics. Of these, the Anholt-Ipsos Nation Branding Index (NBI) is the longest-running and the most influential (see Figure 1). Anholt is credited with having coined the term 'nation brand' in 1996 (Anholt, 2011) and launched his index in 2005, later partnering with Ipsos in 2008.

The NBI measures the power and quality of a country's brand image using six dimensions: exports, governance, culture and heritage, people, tourism, and investment and immigration. These dimensions are like those used in the Portland Soft Power 30 list (SP30, active 2015–2019) (Portland Communications, 2019), which includes enterprise, culture, digital, government, engagement, and education dimensions. As the list's name suggests, the methodology derived from Nye's conceptualisation of soft power and sought to provide countries with a means of assessing their resources (McClory &

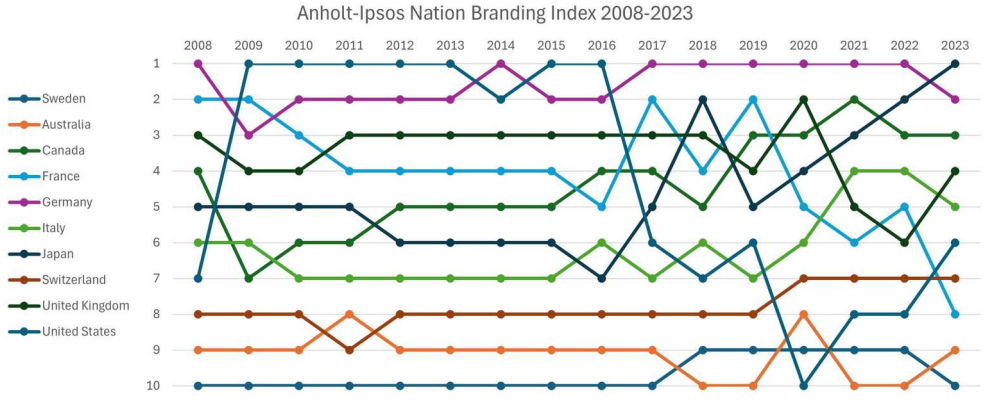

Figure 1. Bump chart of Anholt-Ipsos Nation Branding Index rankings 2008-2023.

Harvey, 2016). The similarities in the dimensions covered, which have at times also resulted in some similar results (for example in 2019, the indices shared nine countries out of the top ten, albeit in different rank positions), and the qualities assessed by these dimensions suggest a connection between having a strong nation brand and wielding soft power in the global community. Indeed, Wang (2024) includes the NBI in their survey of soft power rankings, implying an overlap between the concepts, or at least the available ranking systems and their methodologies. This conceptual overlap is further indicated by the appearance of nine of the same countries in the top ten rankings for both the NBI and the SP30; Italy is absent from the SP30 and the Netherlands from the NBI (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

The dimension of governance present in both the NBI and SP30 also emphasises the desirability of certain political values and ideas predominantly deriving from the Western liberal tradition. This is further underscored by the metrics provided by Anholt's later project, the Good Country Index (GCI), which seeks to measure nation's contributions to global wellbeing. Unlike nation brand indices that focus on public

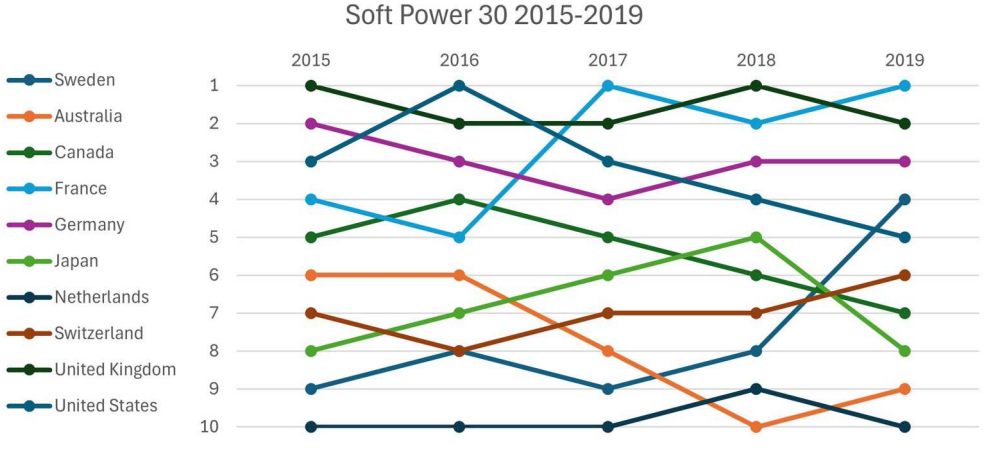

Figure 2. Bump chart of Soft Power 30 Index 2015-2019.

perceptions, the GCI assesses actual policy performance against the index dimensions. Its dimensions are science and technology, culture, international peace and security, world order, planet and climate, prosperity and equality, and health and wellbeing – again, there is significant overlap between the GCI, NBI, and SP30 indicating that certain values, actions, and resources are desirable and attractive. The GCI is, in essence, a measurement of good international citizenship, developing an empirical basis for assessing both the normative and behavioural dimensions of statecraft. In each of these metrics, middle powers tend to perform much better than larger powers (with the exception of the UK and the US in both nation branding and soft power) and are more prominent than in indices of traditional international power.

In each of these ranking systems, Sweden consistently ranks within the top 10 and was first in three of the five available versions of the Good Country Index, including the most recent version 1.5 (see Figure 3). Analysis and commentary on these rankings present a consistent image of Sweden as open, progressive, and appealing. For example, the 2019 overview for Sweden in the SP30 list highlights its 'exemplary model of governance', feminist foreign policy, and commitment to environmental issues, noting the influence of Greta Thunberg in crystalising the image at that time. However, it advises that 'Sweden must stave off the tide of xenophobic, nationalist politics of the far right, and continue to position itself as an open, free society' (Portland Communications, 2019). The need to mitigate these xenophobic trends to protect the Swedish nation brand could be seen in the 2023 Anholt-Ipsos NBI when Sweden's drop from 9th to 10th place (positions it frequently shifts between) was explained by the 'Korankrisen', or 'Quran crisis', which involved several incidents of protesters publicly burning the Quran. Sweden's NBI ranking with Saudi Arabian respondents fell by 28 places, with small drops also occurring in other Muslim-majority countries, such as Türkiye (Anholt, 2023) (Figure 4).

Based on its performance in the GCI and supported by its rankings in the NBI and SP30, Sweden is positioned as a positive global force in both public perception and policy

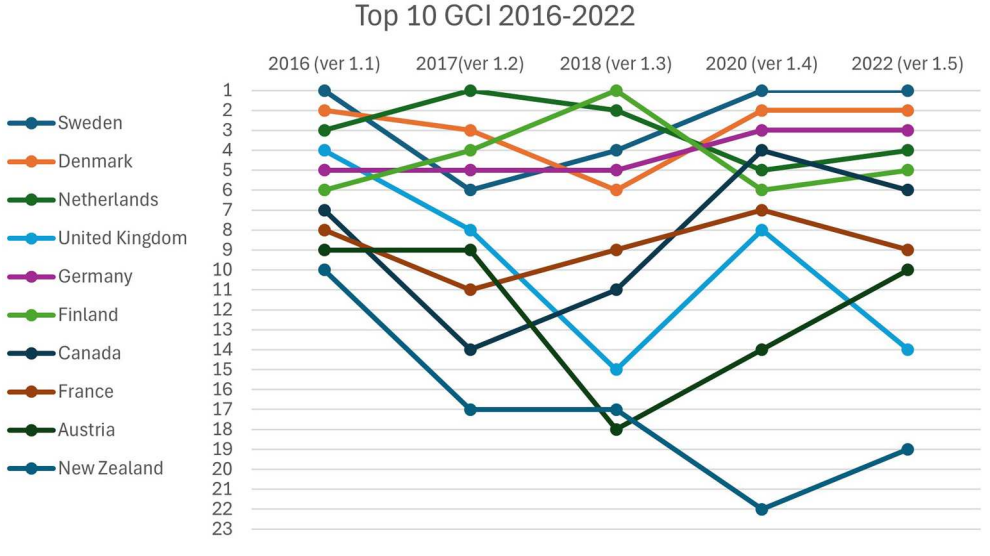

Figure 3. Bump Chart of the top 10 rankings of the Good Country Index, 2016-2022.

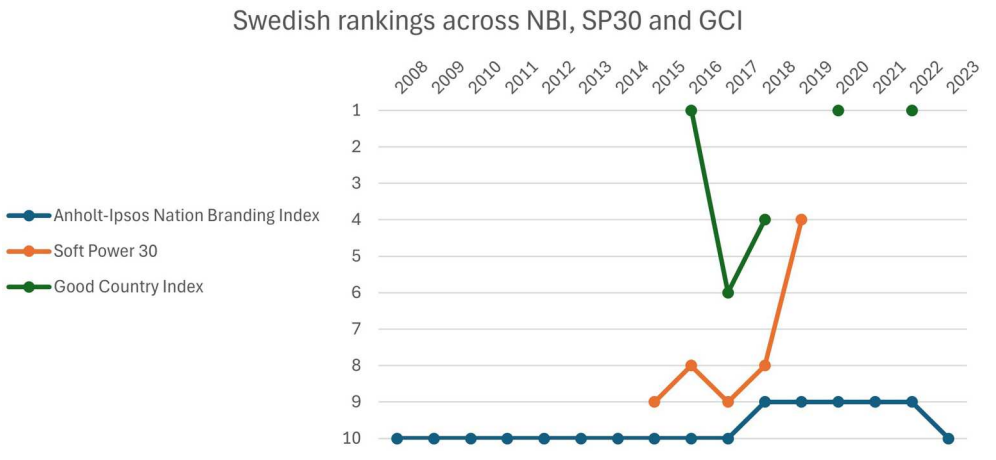

Figure 4. Swedish rankings across NBI, SP30, and GCI. While Sweden is consistent in its NBI rankings, its SP30 and GCI rankings demonstrate similar trajectories.

performance. These also exist in tension with one another, wherein the good international citizenship that accrues Sweden its soft power resources is actively pursued as both a policy approach and a nation brand, similar to the South Korean middle power branding strategy explored by Ayhan (2019). As discussed in the previous section, this is a pragmatic and effective approach for a middle power to enhance its position within the international system, yet as the following illustrates, Sweden's success in building a brand as a good international citizen, moral superpower, and desirably progressive society is as much an historical, realist strategy as it is an altruistic pursuit.

Unpacking the Swedish nation-branding strategy

With this theoretical framing in mind, the remainder of this article examines Sweden's long-term nation-branding strategy as a desirable, progressive, and moral 'soft superpower', utilising its carefully crafted image as good international citizen to respond to existential geopolitical challenges. While Sweden has been a leader in nation-branding and soft power diplomacy since its adoption of the social democratic welfare state and its exportation of a 'Middle Way' model as early as the 1930s (Glover, 2009; Glover and Hellenes, 2021; Marklund, 2017; Kettunen & Petersen, 2022), this article focuses on the period from the Cold War to the present and contextualises contemporary challenges to this image. This history is separated into several key phases of nation-branding, demonstrating the evolution of its 'moral superpower' status.

Phase 1: 1950s–1960s selling progressive Sweden

Sweden's nation-branding strategy as a moral superpower stems from a direct need to repair its international reputation after World War II, where its policies of legalistic neutrality and social democratic arguments of the nation acting as a 'great spiritual power' for peace (Götz, 2016, p. 78) were at odds with its beneficial trade relations that profited from continued steel and iron trade with Nazi Germany (Nordstrom, 2002).

Swedish neutrality came at a cost; in preserving the country's sovereignty, this amoral 'bystander' stance and trade profiteering not only prolonged the war but undermined its credibility on the international stage, leading to Sweden to experience what Götz (2016) calls 'a crisis of international goodwill' (p. 83) during the wartime period.

Towards the end of the war, Sweden recognised the need to repair its reputation through greater involvement with the newly formed United Nations (Götz, 2016), but also by shifting international perceptions away from what Glover (2009) terms wartime 'Amoral Sweden' towards new politico-economic ideals of a 'Progressive Sweden' (p. 254) that could be repeatedly praised for its successful social reforms, economic policy, and standards of living (Glover & Hellenes, 2021). In the era of post-war reconstruction, Marklund and Petersen (2013) note that the Scandinavian states sought to both use 'welfare political guide books' to reconnect with the familiar ideas of socially progressive Sweden of the 1930s, but also to 'place their middle way model as an acceptable alternative in the black and white world of the Cold War' (pp. 249–250).

The Swedes also saw the need to promote their nation in terms of cultural exchange and, in January 1945, established one of the most significant pillars of its soft power and nation-branding approach to this day, the Swedish Institute for Cultural Exchange (SI), known simply as the Swedish Institute. A joint venture between the Swedish state and private organisations, the SI's official purpose was to improve and maintain Swedish cultural, educational and societal relations with other countries while spreading information about Sweden (Lundén, 2022). The goal of the SI was to sell Sweden to the world, and also to re-integrate Sweden, 'a small state highly dependent on foreign markets and political allies' (Glover, 2009, p. 248) in the sphere of the post-war powers while also shaping domestic self-perceptions through positive expressions of Swedish culture, packaged in a way to export to the world. Via the SI's network of information paths within and across Sweden's borders, Glover (2009) notes how 'Sweden's image was not only exported, but foreign imaginings of the country were also imported' (p. 255). Consequently, as Marklund (2017) observes, the welfare state dominated Swedish cultural outreach, public diplomacy and strategic communication in the post-war period, with the SI's efforts marking Sweden as early practitioners in soft power diplomacy but also a burgeoning national image of progress, modernisation, and politico-social superiority (Browning, 2007). Sweden further promoted this image of itself as a good international citizen through new post-war initiatives for foreign development aid, as the welfare state principle was expanded internationally and the Nordic countries become leading contributors to foreign aid programmes (Kettunen & Petersen, 2022).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Sweden's focus was largely on the encouragement of investment, cultural exchange and promoting balance between new Cold War antagonists the USSR and USA, amid which the Nordic countries found themselves geopolitically and ideologically wedged. Fortunately, the early institutionalisation of Sweden's international advertising in the 1930s meant that by the 1950s, they were among the most advanced soft power strategists in the world (Funke, 2022) and well positioned to respond to not only the increasingly bipolar world-system, but also 'a new postwar paradigm that focused on a consumer-oriented brand ideology' (Funke, 2022, p. 1) and export promotion. Here, Funke notes that the Swedish Advertiser's Association was crucial in further developing Sweden's nation-branding strategy, and in 1957 commissioned a report which enabled the pivot to what would later be known as nation-branding:

'revamp the image of the country to both 'Sell Sweden and by doing so, making 'Sweden Sell'' (Funke, 2022, p. 13). This light-bulb moment typifies nation-branding as 'not about selling policy at all, but constituting and selling identity' (Browning & Ferraz de Oliveira, 2017, p. 489).

Phase 2: 1970s–1980s ideating a moral superpower

At the heart of this branding strategy and, to a greater extent, Swedish national identity, was also the idea of 'Nordic exceptionalism' (Lawler, 1997, p. 567), which was especially significant in bolstering navigating Cold War tensions and further promoting their middle power status by differentiating the ''peaceloving and rational' Nordics from the rest of 'warlike' or 'conflict-prone' Europe' (Marklund, 2017, p. 627). According to Browning (2007), 'instead of the inevitable conflict between states, the Nordics presented themselves as having successfully overcome the security dilemma between themselves to establish a region of peace and prosperity' (p. 32). While the SI commenced as a largely cultural mouthpiece for Sweden abroad, this pivot to politico-social advertiser of the 'Swedish model' as a middle way grew throughout the 1970s. Consequently, Swedish internationalism emerged from the domestic welfare state core as a universalist call for a global model of redistributive social justice; the interplay between domestic and international politics enabling, as Bergman (2007, p. 74) notes, the Swedish state to also 'reinforce their self-narrative as good international citizens'. According to Marklund (2017, p. 627), the strong performance of the Swedish economy, geopolitical messaging of the Nordic region as a neutral, Northern European bloc and the Swedish welfare state as 'a socio-political alternative in the ideological conflict of the global Cold War' were clear selling points, generating a powerful soft power message that the Swedish model could be exported to the world as a superior ideological product.

However, Sweden's moralistic middle-power attempt at bridging the gap between the ideologically-opposed great powers was no easy feat. In 1970 the SI was reorganised from a state-private venture into a state-financed yet organisationally independent foundation, largely due to an ideological rift between investment-driven companies and 1960s cultural radicalisation that pushed back against cultural production being part of capitalist market ideologies (Åkerlund, 2015). Such rifts were also seen to polarise images of Sweden abroad, especially in the United States, where Nordic protests against US involvement in Vietnam and the overwhelmingly socialist overtones of welfare state policies framed mainstream American conceptions of the Nordic 'middle way' as an undesirable mix of worker's paradise and a and high-taxed, nanny-state dystopia (Marklund & Petersen, 2013, p. 254). The welfare state label became much more controversial as a force for cultural diplomacy when dealing with US and other Western nations (Marklund, 2017), especially as it became increasingly difficult to view the 'economic and social developments of the Eastern Bloc as attractive models or powerful potentials' (Kettunen & Petersen, 2022, p. 24). Consequently, from the 1980s, 'the metaphor of the Third Way no longer came to mean an alternative between capitalism and socialism but was instead applied to economic and social politics bridging between Keynesianism and neo-Liberalism, i.e. between different modes of regulating capitalism' (Kettunen & Petersen, 2022, p. 25). As such, the Swedish nation-branding strategy's social democratic underpinnings

required behavioural adaptation and revision to remain relevant in the age of US global hegemony.

Phase 3: 1990s–2000s the good international citizen

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and collapse of the USSR, Swedish public diplomacy faced several key challenges, but also opportunities within the Baltic region for increased Nordic Internationalism (Bergman, 2007). Even prior to the former communist countries of Eastern Europe establishing diplomatic independence, Swedish diplomats had used low politics and soft diplomacy strategies to lay the groundwork for an emerging Baltic-Nordic 'new regionalism' (Lundén, 2022) that promised new markets for Swedish business and greater economic benefits for the entire region built on liberal democratic tenets (Hellenes, 2021). The SI was given a key role in strengthening cultural and economic ties across the Baltic, leading to a significant increase in scholarships and development assistance (Åkerlund, 2015; Hellenes, 2021). Greater incorporation of the Nordic nations as part of the European Union also assisted with a burgeoning sense of regionalism and cooperation as a larger power bloc, further enabling Sweden to act as a middle power amongst neighbours with similarly aligned values and strategic goals.

The 1990s truly became an era of soft power diplomacy, which Hellenes (2021) notes was 'a key transition period for the renegotiation of the relationship between business, politics and culture in Swedish foreign promotion and cultural diplomacy' (p. 90). Against a backdrop of deepening globalisation pressures and growing calls for greater European integration and collaboration, and with the works of Nye gaining a wider audience, more nations began to see 'soft power as a way to understand the benefits that accrue to an international actor from having values or culture considered attractive by foreign audiences' (Cull, 2016, p. 157). In 1997, the SI was reorganised into a full government agency under the control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), no longer acting as the relatively independent organisation it had been since 1945 (Åkerlund, 2015).

From 1999 onwards, issues of globalisation and neoliberal competition led to the explosion of place branding research. Scholars such as Roulac (1999), Aronczyk (2008) and Cassinger et al. (2021) have explored the 'Nordic wave' of place branding that emerged from the late 1990s as one that 'embraced Nordicity as an ideological and socio-cultural construct' (Cassinger et al., 2021, p. 71), and acted as both a moral orientation and a desirable investment market based on soft power ideals of the Scandinavians' 'good reputation' (Aronczyk, 2008, p. 291). This constructed 'Nordic brand', according to Cassinger et al. (2021), deterritorialised the connection between local Scandinavian cultures and imaginary ideals within globalised, unbounded systems; 'Nordic' becoming a floating signifier of multiple meanings that were circulated in global flows of ideas and practices in increasingly abstract and potentially stereotypical ways, focusing on Nordic 'symbolic features and mythical qualities, typically characterised by welfare, social equality and peace' (Cassinger et al., 2021, pp. 74–75). Since then Sweden has further institutionalised its nation branding, with the MFA maintaining government responsibility for country promotion (Brach, 2010).

In 2005, the SI participated in the Anholt Nation Brands Index (NBI), with Sweden coming first in consumer perceptions of tourism, people, culture and heritage, investment and immigration, governance and export (Glover, 2009), while the panel noting that:

> Top of our list came Sweden, with consistently high scores all around the hexagon. This country is almost universally admired, and its brand image boasts a rare combination of stable and responsible governance, honest and trustworthy people, successful cultural exports, a prime location for investment, and yet isn't seen as boring and predictable, but young and dynamic. Few other countries manage to maintain such a healthy balance between basic reassurance and a touch of vibrancy, adventure and youthful spirit. (NBI, cited in Glover, 2009, p. 256)

Clearly, Sweden's half-century of strategic nation-branding had successfully established itself as a world leader in soft power indicators, progressive internationalist values, and domestic quality of life. In projecting this moral superpower image on both domestic and international fronts while verifying it as reality with such positive metrics, Sweden reached the pinnacle as both a good international citizen *and* middle power exemplar.

Phase 4: 2010–2020s aligning ideals with reality

Over the last two decades, it is significant to note that Sweden's nation-branding as both a good international citizen and moral superpower has not been without significant challenges. Domestically, since 2002 the Swedish Social Democratic party has experienced decline, and so too has promotion of its welfare state model, which has been seen to also be in dire need of revision (Andersson, 2014; Sanandaji, 2018). In 2006, the Centre-Right coalition under Fredrik Reinfeldt unseated the Social Democrats, and despite the Nordic countries weathering the 2008 Global Financial Crisis relatively well (Kettunen & Petersen, 2022; Marklund, 2017), a far-right surge by the Sweden Democrats from 2010 built on growing anti-immigration and anti-Islam sentiment saw even further decline in support for Social Democratic ideals (Tomson, 2020). Despite having one of the most established and internationally renowned multicultural policies dating back to the 1970s and progressive policies on asylum seekers, humanitarianism and human rights (Bengy-Puyvallée & Bjørkdahl, 2021; Brysk, 2009), the rise of conservative and far-right voices in response to the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis was not only felt in Sweden but also suggested a 'broad consensus' across Europe that multiculturalism was in marked decline (Borevi, 2012). Such a shift has been seen as a key challenge for the 'Progressive Sweden' brand, with many commentators lamenting the decline of the welfare state in the face of growing security and crime statistics, or alternatively presenting overt arguments for immigration restriction to 'save' the welfare state from globalising forces – implying, in essence, that Sweden was a failed social experiment (Schroeder, 2023). Conversely, Naper (2022) suggests that during the 2015 migrant crisis Scandinavian countries, including Sweden, were able to spin increased border securitisation as 'compassionate', thereby legitimising the decision in news media and framing it as consistent with the region's branding. According to a 2018 SI report, Sweden's nation-branding has also been continually damaged by negative social media, which has been blamed for the persistence of distorted and amplified imagery of Sweden in decline, mainly due to the 'negative associations of immigration with crime and disorder' (cited in Schroeder, 2023, p. 679).

Notably, twenty-first century international developments have been overshadowed by a shift in global power balances that has made Sweden's geopolitical situation far from secure, marking a clear pivot in the nation's strategic outlook but also its nation-branding

practices. Emerging great-power rivalries between the USA and China and their associated spheres of influence have disrupted global trade and globalisation processes whilst challenging the very existence of the USA-led liberal world order (Hosli et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2021). Unlike the bipolar ideological contestations of the Cold War, during which Sweden adroitly remained neutral and adopted its moral superpower image, contemporary battlegrounds centre on a discourse of democracy versus autocracy, as well as 'the latest round in a perennial cycle of big power rivalry' (Kuik, 2023, p. 1184). With European security still tied to American power and liberal internationalist grand strategy, a fraying of the transatlantic partnership and bifurcating security priorities between the USA/China and the EU/Russia have forced many European nations – including Sweden – to seek greater regional security as they struggle to 'cope with an antagonistic world of great power conflict' (Groitl, 2020).

Significantly, following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Sweden reluctantly dismantled its 200-year policy of non-alignment and armed neutrality, applying for and eventually gaining membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alongside its fellow non-aligned neighbour Finland (Alberque & Schreer, 2022; Savolainen, 2024). Swedish and Finnish affiliation with NATO appears to be a strategically-realist reaction to great power politics (Simons et al., 2019), in line with Patience's (2014) Concert of Europe model, and this development also signifies 'a bigger shift away from their traditional brands of autonomous foreign policy to integrate more deeply into western alliances' (Michalski et al., 2024, p. 140).

Despite this shift, vestiges of the moral superpower label and good international citizen remain rooted in Swedish ideals and its perceived role as a normative internationalist state. Significantly, rather than rushing to join NATO for protection as Finland did, Sweden undertook a complex assessment of its shifting role in international affairs, well aware of the potential damage alignment would have on its reputation abroad (Michalski et al., 2024; Savolainen, 2024). Arguing that Sweden and the international community's best interests were 'served by soft power and the country's role as a positive force for good, to maintain relations and communications with all parties'(-Simons et al., 2019, p. 343), Sweden thus attempted to continue non-alignment for as long as possible. Instead of being pushed to join NATO by Russia, the loss of Finland as the only other non-aligned state in the Baltic region was more influential in reluctantly pulling Sweden into the alliance (Savolainen, 2024). Furthermore, when considering established trends of Swedish integration into the EU as Bergman notes, wider EU membership and regionalisation over the last two decades has meant that many of the normative values framing the EU's 'foreign and security policy are consistent with a specifically Nordic conception of good international conduct'(Bergman, 2007, p. 94). In the context of Russia, a belligerent actor threatening regional stability and security, it can be argued that Swedish domestic moral values of justice, solidarity and inclusiveness can still be exported as part of Swedish internationalism, and the social democratic conception of global obligation across borders (Bergman, 2007). In this way, Swedish alignment, its commitment to regionalism and defence, could be framed once again as a new type of moral pragmatism, where taking a stand and aligning with other liberal democratic nations that share common values is still a major part of their nation brand.

Discussion

In recent years, Sweden has consistently employed more external branding consultants, aiming to strengthen their image as part of a wider economic agenda driven by foreign investment attraction, tourism, and the deployment of 'Swedishness as a commercial tool internationally' (Hellenes, 2021, p. 107). However, this is not for solely economic or selfish purposes. For Marklund (2017), contemporary Swedish nation-branding and public diplomacy has focused on six key aspects, ultimately designed to improve society and the wider world, not just Sweden itself: '(1) "Made in Sweden", (2) "Equality", (3) "The open society", (4) "Share the future – the global village", (5) "Welfare and security", and finally (6) "Future and sustainability"' (p. 630). Not surprisingly, these six pillars have enabled Swedish nation-branding to excel against other states and quantify their success as an effective middle power. In essence, one may chart the evolution of this strategy, and these six pillars, down to an evolution of the messages themselves (Figure 5).

As the above history shows, Sweden has strategically curated its image as a good international citizen that projected not only a sense of enlightened self-interest, but also humanitarian and cosmopolitan values (Evans, 1989). Sweden and the Nordic region are – and remain – exceptional; due to their geopolitical position wedged between competing powers across much of the twentieth century, Sweden and the other Nordic nations needed to develop their normative moral ideals that stressed societal progress, innovation, and global peace while offering an ideological exemplar for other nations to follow for their own survival (Cooper et al., 1993; Nossal, 1999). This middle power positioning as 'global do-gooders' (Lawler, 1992) and 'civilising agents' in international society (Shapcott, 2020, p. 246) was crucial for Sweden in being able to preach its morally superior messages to attract economic and political allies without fear of patronising or alienating external audiences. Nation-branding practices that stressed these ideals while

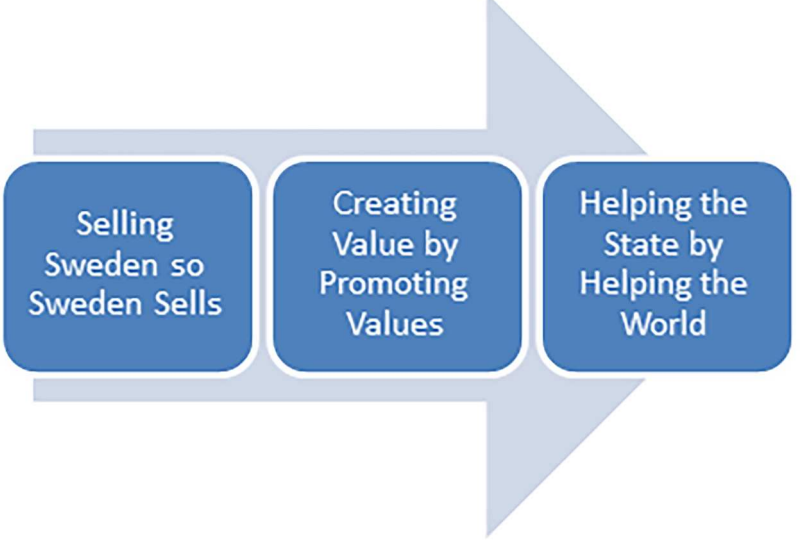

Figure 5. The process of developing the Swedish nation brand into its good international citizen brand.

encouraging a global re-imagining of Sweden as a positive force for good – and one that encouraged others to also follow more cosmopolitan and humanitarian mindsets (Nossal, 1999) – was the vehicle for this success. Furthermore, in many ways, Sweden's good international citizenship was in part enacted through its moral entrepreneurship, which in turn builds both its nation brand and its soft power resources.

Despite the recent abandonment of military neutrality, it appears that Sweden is still operating under a neo-Kantian behavioural/normative framework (Patience, 2014), yet its 'moral superpower' status has been undermined in that it has moved from a harmony-orientated to a balance-of-power approach. As such, while working to maintain its activist and internationalist mission to improve the world through multilateral cooperation, niche diplomacy, entrepreneurial leadership and coalition-building (Dahl, 2006; Efstathopoulos, 2018), there has been an impact on its status as a 'moral superpower', and the ability to preach on such topics.

Conclusion: the future of Swedish nation-branding?

Currently, Sweden's nation-branding strategies and their global soft power image can be described as tarnished, yet still remarkably flexible and adaptable. Despite criticisms of the welfare state as outdated, and that consistently high scores in citizen happiness and quality of life indicators are simply a thin veneer of a no longer desirable or sustainable socio-political system, scholars are adamant that the Swedish welfare state is not dead (Schroeder, 2023), and that the strength of the Nordic model in general is its 'capacity to reform and restructure itself in the era of flexible capitalism' (Kettunen & Petersen, 2022, pp. 26–27). Importantly, this adaptability and reimagining comes from the very fact that the definition of 'Sweden' and 'Swedishness' has been largely cultivated by others' external opinions (Glover, 2009), 'a continuous recirculation and revamping of images that were projected and then reimported in different forms' (Kettunen & Petersen, 2022, p. 21) through various cultural channels and institutes operating on a global level. According to Marklund (2017), Sweden's strength continues to lie in its ability to generate attention and attraction as 'a progressive norm entrepreneur with a relatively generous welfare state [that] also engenders important soft power aspects which may have geopolitical as well as domestic policy implications' (p. 634). Future studies may seek to explore the implications of the emerging paradigm shift to the wider Nordic brand, or to other states that act as either moral superpowers or good international citizens.

For nation-branding scholars, the label of 'Progressive Sweden' continues to drive not only Swedish soft power but also their wider middle-power national image, which remains linked to new imaginings of the welfare state, amended for twenty-first century challenges (Glover, 2009; Marklund, 2017). Indeed, Swedish public diplomacy and new programmes of nation-branding seem to emerge in times of economic and social crisis, first as social democracy, then the exportable welfare state and moral superpower, then as a regional soft power and 'European' Sweden built on increasingly liberal-conservative values (Hellenes, 2021). Through all these phases, the ideal of the good international citizen has been present and will continue to guide future neo-Kantian strategies. While Sweden is not wholly beyond reproach in its domestic and international policies, its consistently strong performance in the Good Country Index suggests that, for the most part, Sweden does what it says on the metaphorical flatpack box of its nation brand.

While geopolitical circumstances continue to change, Sweden must ensure that any future wavering from established moral norms are framed as consistent with its broader values as a good international citizen.

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