

Michael Fullilove of Lowy Institute introduced Carl Bildt, one of Europe's finest statesman and a prominent political figure in Sweden, in a webinar conducted on Wednesday. Fullilove recounted Bildt's successful political career where he navigated his way from a renowned lawmaker to the Prime Minister of Sweden in 1991. He went on to serve in numerous important positions in the international arena and later served in the capacity of the Foreign Minister of Sweden from 2006 to 2014.

Upon being questioned about the controversial approach taken by Sweden in the face of COVID-19 pandemic, Bildt described Sweden's decision to not impose a strict lockdown such is the general trend currently. Instead, the government made hard recommendations to their populace on guidelines they should ideally follow. The consequence was, Bildt expressed, that compared to the other Nordic countries in the neighbouring region, Sweden has three times the fatalities of all the neighbours' fatalities combined. "4000 dead in a country of 10 million... a rather disturbing record," He added.



Image source: REUTERS

Bildt emphasized the role of lockdowns and social distancing has played in decreasing the number of fatalities around the world. He cited the example of Italy where he compared the figures of the Lombardy region and Rome. Nevertheless, he thinks that numerous studies should be conducted to properly understand the lessons which should be learnt from this pandemic.

He stated that as the world is still in relatively earlier stages of the pandemic, it is still hard to determine the extent of its effects on the economy. However, he believes that as Sweden is integrated with the global economy, it will go into the expected downturn just as any other country.

Bildt informed of the “fairly bad experience” Europe had at first during the initial outbreak of the pandemic as certain big countries such as France closed borders. Fortunately, the internal market, which is the key to the European economy, is functional again and the EU is going to propose a rescue package which will soon help repair the various national economies in the region. He also mentioned the instrumental role that Germany has played in bridging the North-South divide.

On the inevitable topic of Brexit, Bildt commented that the EU is losing a significant country and Britain is losing significant support, while both of them are losing “foreign policy weight”. The long-term effects of Brexit largely depend on the nature of the agreement when it will be concluded and the factors that influence it such as the restricted timeline. An important outcome will be the strategic partnership the two are able to forge on the other side of the agreement.

Bildt conveyed his views on the United States’ reaction to the pandemic and the possible impact it can have on the world order. The United States is going to be preoccupied with the Chinese threat and there is a high chance of increased conflicts and less cooperation in the global order. A factor that has major significance is whether President Trump stays in the White House or not. This is the first time that the United States has not taken a leadership position in any kind of global crisis. Bildt commented, “that is fundamentally new and disturbing,” as the focus remains on ‘America First’.



Image source: Bloomberg

Countries such as those in Europe should come together and formulate coherent security policies so they too can become global players and not get trampled by China or Russia. The question Australia raised about conducting an independent investigation into the origin of COVID-19 was reasonable, according to Bildt. There always has been an inquiry in prior similar situations such as SARS. However, questions should not be raised only in regard to China's behaviour but other international states as well who made mistakes in the handling of the pandemic.

Europe's shift in perception of China as a commercial opportunity to a strategic player has been evident since before COVID-19. It was first Berlin last year, followed by the EU commission who started viewing China as a systematic competitor. This shift has accelerated in during the pandemic but it will not be as extreme as witnessed in the United States. Europe would want both competitions as well as engagement with China. Sweden's relationship with China, in particular, has soured since a diplomatic tiff over a Chinese-born

Swedish citizen. But the commercial relationship stays strong as ever.

Former Swedish PM believes that the new trend of ‘Wolf Warrior’ diplomacy in China’s engagement with foreign nations is not in their best interest in long-term as it has been largely counterproductive from the Chinese point of view. This approach seems indicative of inexperience as the Chinese envoys have failed to balance their diplomacy. He hopes that eventually, the Chinese will be able to finetune their diplomacy in a more constructive manner.

The session came to an end after an extensive round of questions from the audience regarding subjects such as Brexit, Russia and One China Policy.

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