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Finland's Foreign and Security Policy: From Bridge-Building to the Core of the West

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brief

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Introduction

When the Finnish president Sauli Niinistö gave his New Year's speech on 1 January 2022, he addressed the deteriorating security situation in Northern Europe (Niinistö, 2022). Russia had amassed probably more than 100,000 soldiers near the border of Ukraine, and President Putin had issued demands for a new security order that were impossible for EU members to accept. Finland had found itself in a deteriorating security situation that, while seemingly new and undergoing rapid change, was worryingly familiar to the Finnish people. When Russia decided to invade Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the worst fears of the Finnish people were realized.

During the Cold War, Finland was caught between East and West and combined a strong defence with a balancing act that entailed favouring the West as far as possible, but without upsetting the Soviets or giving them any cause to intervene. Now, in the early 2020s, it seemed as though the Finnish security situation had returned to the Cold War, but under new conditions. Today, Finland is a member of the EU, has defence cooperation with Sweden that borders on an alliance, and is a trusted partner of NATO. In addition, Finland has also developed close bilateral security cooperation with the USA, illustrated not least by President Niinistö's visit to President Biden soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At the same time, Russia now occupies a weaker position in Europe than that of the USSR during the Cold War. Finland once again has had to balance its Western identity and desire to further integrate in Western security cooperation against the need not to upset Russia or perhaps act as a bridge-builder or at least communication channel. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, the possibility to build bridges between East and West have decreased, as not even Russia can expect Finland not to react with the strongest possible criticism of the Russian breach of the European security order. As the Russian invasion of Ukraine has confirmed the worst fears of the Finnish people, at the same time as Russia is occupied in Ukraine, a window of opportunity opened during the spring of 2022. Finland found itself in a situation where there was both a need for and a possibility to re-evaluate its security policy.

In this policy brief, I turn to central themes in Finnish foreign and security policy playing out in different arenas. This is done based on previous research findings, but also on public statements from Finnish officials. First, however, I turn to a general and defining theme in Finnish foreign policy, at least up until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a theme I call the 'Spirit of Helsinki'.

Spirit of Helsinki

From an early phase of Finnish independence, Finland had to balance its search for autonomy against a policy of caution towards Russia. The threat from the East was manifested during the Second World War, specifically with the Winter and Continuation wars, and after the heroic defence of Finnish independence, the republic was forced into hard peace terms with the USSR. These terms included the

imposed Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (the 'YYA' Treaty, in the Finnish abbreviation) of 1948 according to which Finland promised to halt any attacks from the West against Finland, or against the USSR through Finnish territory, and to consult with the USSR on major foreign and security policy issues, if the USSR requested such consultations (Meinander 2020: 205-2010). The Treaty was an important part of Finnish foreign and security policy during the presidencies of Paasikivi (1946–1956) and Kekkonen (1956–1982). Finnish foreign and security policy during these years has sometimes been described in terms of of 'Finlandization', a term later used more generally to describe a foreign and security policy based on accommodations to the will of a great power. While the Finlandization process may have been necessary, according to the Finnish elite at the time, it also led to a need to balance the image of adjustment to the USSR, with an independent voice. What is sometimes referred to as the 'Spirit of Helsinki', manifested in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, was long an important example of this need, and of the special role Finland could play as a communication channel between East and West. Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, this spirit has been alive in Finnish foreign policy. According to the Spirit of Helsinki, Finland has a special role to play as a communicator that can promote stability and peaceful co-existence in Northern Europe, especially during times of international tension (cf. Pesu & Vanhanen, 2021).

The Helsinki Final Act and the CSCE Helsinki Summit in 1975 were key elements of the détente process during the latter part of the Cold War. More recently, there have been discussions regarding a new summit in Helsinki in 2025, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. The Helsinki spirit has also been revitalized with the ideas of an Arctic summit and of a European Security conference or summit, both initiatives presented by President Niinistö. At the same time, initiatives within OSCE, the successor to CSCE, or in the form of an Arctic summit have been hampered by the growing tensions in the near neighbourhood, with Russia's violation of the Helsinki principles from 1975 in annexing Crimea in 2014, role in the war in Eastern Ukraine from 2014 onwards (Pesu & Vanhanen, 2021), and, of course, invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The burning question for Finland has been how much tension can find manageable while being able to revitalize the Helsinki spirit. Relatedly, Finland also have had to decide whether a revitalized Helsinki spirit should be channelled through OSCE (probably allowing for less tension), or whether it should be a Finnish initiative (allowing for more tension). However, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and breach of Ukrainian sovereignty, the European security order, and international law, these questions may be irrelevant for the foreseeable future.

Against this historical background and the roles Finland has tried to play, it can be argued that there has long been tension in Finnish foreign policy between the role of critic (of aggressive Russian behaviour) and of bridge-builder or communicator (accepting some tension for the greater good). Balancing these two roles has been developed into an art form in Finnish

diplomacy. The older generation, with its experience of the Cold War, was especially versed in this art of dealing with Russian pressure, sometimes manifesting in dramatic new demands presented during ongoing meetings, while maintaining a Western orientation (Laurén, 2022). The question today, when the Western course of action has been manifested and implemented to a much greater degree in Finnish foreign and security policy than during the Cold War, and when Russia by its own choice has expelled itself from the European security order, is whether the Finns will have the same ambition to play the role of a communicator between East and West, even in the highly likely scenario of a Finnish membership in NATO. I now examine how these considerations play out in four central arenas, i.e., the Arctic, EU, Nordic, and NATO arenas.

Finland as an Arctic state

In 2021 the Finnish government adopted a new Arctic Strategy, the first since 2013. This strategy defines Finland not only as an Arctic state but also as a key actor in the Arctic *and* Antarctic, which, according to the strategy, should have the effect of branding Finland in the international community, since 'the Arctic character of entire Finland supports and enhances Finland's international image as an Arctic country in international contexts' (Finnish Arctic Strategy, 2021: 12). In the strategy, four priority areas are identified: climate change, inhabitants, expertise, and infrastructure and logistics.

According to the Finnish government, one important change since the previous strategy is the increase in great power competition in the area. As a key actor, Finland's special role in the Arctic is to provide stability with the aim of 'build[ing] a peaceful Arctic region marked by constructive cooperation' (Finnish Arctic Strategy, 2021: 15). One way to achieve this is through strong Finnish support for the Arctic council and a coherent Arctic policy within the EU. Although the war in Ukraine makes it unlikely that the area should be described as marked by constructive cooperation, at least in the near future, it is still important to note the Finnish ambition to play a key role in the Arctic and to provide stability.

According to the Finnish government, and to a familiar narrative, the key reason why great power competition has increased in the Arctic region is the melting of Arctic ice and, relatedly, the opening of new logistic routes and access to unexploited natural resources. With this new situation a new security climate has appeared, marked by increasing military presence in the area (Finnish government, 2020). Here Finland has found its role as a state that 'must exert influence in a manner which contributes to stability' (Finnish Arctic Strategy, 2021: 17). The open question that remains is whether Finland will be able to return to such a role after Russia's war in Ukraine. Still, the Finnish ambition has so far been clear: Finland has sought the role of dialogue facilitator in an arena that has been increasingly characterized by militarization and international tension (Pesu & Vanhanen, 2021). This ambition arguably echoes the Spirit of Helsinki and Finland's desire to moderate the great power rivalry in the area.

Adaptability and compromise-seeking in the EU core

Another example of how Finland is seeking a role that works in favour of stability can be found in its behaviour as an EU member, although the agenda here is more unconditionally oriented towards the West. Ever since its accession in 1995, Finland has been known for being 'best in class' in terms of its adherence to EU regulations. For example, Finland adopted the Euro, while both Denmark and Sweden decided to stick to their national currencies. Finland has also criticized various forms of rule bending, in terms of both not following adopted regulations and bending rules in a way that expands their meaning, in a federal direction (Heinikoski, 2021). Finland, in other words, is a Member State that plays an active role in the integration process and stays loyal to the agreements reached. This approach has given Finland a reputation for being a trustworthy partner in the EU machinery, with Finland being a Member State with which others favour cooperating (Johansson, Naurin, & Lindahl, 2019).

This can be seen as a way for Finland to foster stability in the integration process. However, a potential for dissonance appeared in Finnish foreign policy when the willingness to accept some tension in the North came into conflict with the acceptance of EU criticism of Russian behaviour. This potential does not seem to have been realized so far; rather, Finland has gradually become bolder towards Russia, this being manifested in a 'Europeanized' foreign policy in which Finland has prioritized foreign and security cooperation within the EU (Pesu, Iso-Markku, & Jokela, 2020).

This example strengthens the impression of Finland as moving as far as possible towards the West, rather than prioritizing the role as communicator. Still, Finland has provided the West with a communication channel to Moscow, both before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with President Niinistö acting as a sort of EU liaison officer to Moscow. The question that has long remained germane is how far to the West Finland can orient itself without upsetting Russia. In its report on foreign and security policy from 2020, the incoming Finnish coalition government stated that 'Finland maintains functioning and close relations with Russia in sectors of key importance for Finland and the EU. Finland cooperates and engages in dialogue with Russia on bilateral issues, the international situation and security, global challenges, such as climate and environmental issues, and Baltic Sea and Arctic region issues, and promotes the economic relations between the countries' (Finnish government, 2020). With Russia's clear choice to ignore the European security order, it is now a more open question as to the extent to which Finland will be able to maintain any functioning relationship with Russia at all, and if Finland even will have the ability to communicate between East and West in the future, especially since the Russian aggression has given Finland an opportunity to go 'all in' in terms of its identity as a core member of Europe, and to activate its 'NATO option', rather than to act as a European country of the Eastern flank.

Helsinki has continued to signal that it will stay within the core of the EU, even in sensitive areas of integration such as cooperation on security policy. Today this includes being one of the most active proponents of Article 42.7 and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) in general (see Pesu in Fägersten et al., 2021). This could be understood against the background of Russian aggression in Ukraine since 2014, after which Finland revised its security policy in the direction of new bilateral and multilateral partnerships. Here cooperation within the EU, including via PESCO and the European Defence Fund, has become one of several pieces of the Finnish security puzzle that Finns understand as increasing deterrence and making it more likely that Finland will receive political and military support in a crisis (see Pesu in Fägersten et al., 2021).

Activating the NATO option

Just as Finland has been adaptable in relation to the EU, it has also been adaptable towards NATO, although maintaining a policy of non-membership until now. Together with Sweden, Finland has repeatedly been named NATO's closest partner. During the run-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO General Secretary Jens Stoltenberg returned to this status and was careful to consult with both Finland and Sweden (NATO, 2022). Finland and Sweden appear to be members in all ways except for Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, codifying mutual defence obligations.

Still, the important difference from Finland's EU policy is of course its non-member status. For both Finland and Sweden, this has been a policy intended to foster stability in Northern Europe. One way to put it is to say that Finland and Sweden have moved as closely as possible towards NATO, but without undermining the security structure of the region and thereby upsetting Russia and making dialogue impossible with this Eastern great power (cf. Brommesson, 2015).

Although Finland and Sweden are moving in tandem in many parts of their security policy, there is one notable difference. Finland has declared an explicit NATO option, i.e., that NATO could be an option if and when Finland sees this as the best choice. Sweden has not declared such a NATO option but has instead emphasized a consistent policy of non-alignment.[1] Although the differences should not be exaggerated, it has still been possible to see this difference as a sign of a stronger Finnish desire to move as close to the West as possible. The Finnish ambition to stay in the core of EU defence cooperation is another sign of this.

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the debate on NATO membership has intensified in both Finland and Sweden. The above-mentioned differences in nuance have once again appeared in the debate. While Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson initially stuck to the traditional Swedish policy, saying that non-alignment provided stability, Finnish Prime Minister

[1] However, five parties that together have a majority in the Swedish parliament have now advocated a Swedish NATO option.

Sanna Marin soon opened up for a potential membership. At the time of publication of this policy brief, there is still ongoing debate on NATO membership within all Finnish political parties, a debate Prime Minister Marin says will be thorough but swift (Yle, 2022).

In the government report on the security situation after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the consequences of a membership are spelled out. According to the Finnish government, a membership in NATO would imply that "[t]he deterrent effect of Finland's defence would be considerably stronger than it is at present, as it would be based on the capabilities of the entire Alliance". (Finnish government 2022: 26) On the other hand, a membership could also lead to "increasing tensions on the border between Finland and Russia." Finland will therefore "strengthen its preparedness for becoming a target of wide-ranging hybrid influence activities and in order to prevent and respond to such efforts to exercise influence" (ibid: 28). The Finnish government also aims "to continue to maintain functioning relations with Russia in the event it becomes a NATO member" (ibid: 27), which is of special interest concerning the discussion above on the balance between the Western orientation and the role as a communicator between East and West.

The Nordic and the Finnish–Swedish defence cooperation

In the Nordic arena, Finland has been giving a high priority to Nordic cooperation, including defence cooperation between all Nordic countries within the Nordic Defence Cooperation – NORDEFCO, trilateral cooperation on civil defence with Norway and Sweden, and far-reaching operative defence cooperation with Sweden. The close cooperation between the Nordic states also provides Finland with the opportunity to coordinate policies within different international organizations (Finnish government, 2020: 29–30; Swedish government, 2020).

In the Nordic arena, Finnish–Swedish defence cooperation stands out. While the Finnish EU policy speaks in favour of further movement towards the West, the Finnish–Swedish defence cooperation could until now have been seen as an example of a more cautious security policy, that has been going hand in hand with the role of a communicator between East and West and a form of security cooperation that fosters stability in Northern Europe (Ojanen & Raunio, 2018; Pesu, 2020). This defence cooperation started out from a renaissance of the Nordic dimension in the foreign policies of the Nordic countries, and Finland and Sweden have then taken additional and more ambitious steps and giving a higher priority to the Nordic dimension in their foreign policies than have the Nordic members of NATO (Brommesson, 2015, 2018). For both Finland and Sweden, their ambitious defence cooperation has expanded their understanding of what is possible within the frame of non-alignment (cf. Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2020). Both countries have seen their defence cooperation as an alternative that balances strengthened military capacity with caution. Again, as during the Cold War, Finland, up until Russia's invasion of Ukraine, sought a

road that combines defence capacity with stability, based on small-state realism.

However, this deep and ambitious form of cooperation, including classified operative planning for tactical behaviour in the event of a crisis or even war, has during the process of further defence integration, raised the concerns regarding the different motives for that cooperation in Helsinki and Stockholm, respectively. Signals from Helsinki have during these years indicated a positive attitude towards even deeper cooperation, explicitly not ruling out the possibility of a formal defence alliance between the two countries. In its report on foreign and security policy from 2020, the Finnish government stated that 'the building of deeper cooperation with Sweden will continue without any predetermined limitations' (Finnish government, 2020). Stockholm, in contrast, has seemed satisfied with the present cooperation, without needing to specify its character in terms of an alliance. As has been pointed out, for Finland the defence cooperation with Sweden has been a step towards the West, whereas for Sweden it has been a step towards the East; for Finland it has been a step closer to security, but for Sweden it has been a step closer to trouble. For Finland this has raised the question of whether Sweden is a partner to be trusted in a worst-case scenario (cf. Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2020). With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these questions may very well have lost their relevance for the foreseeable future. At centre of the Finnish debate is instead the importance of a well-coordinated process between Finland and Sweden in relation to potential memberships in NATO (Finnish government 2022: 28).

Conclusion: between flexibility and uncertainty

Finland has been often described as increasingly flexible in its security policy, keeping many doors open at the same time, with its publicly declared NATO option and ongoing debate on potential membership, but with a historically stronger openness to dialogue with Russia. This flexibility has until February 2022 been amplified through the many different forms of bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation that Finland, like Sweden, is part of. This Finnish flexibility has been a continuation of an open attitude to different forms of security cooperation, with the form providing Finland with the most security making it to the top of the agenda. At the same time – and here Finland has historically differed from Sweden – Finland has also been more flexible in its relations with Russia. It has combined strong loyalty to European sanctions on Russia since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 with a desire to keep communication channels with Moscow open – at least up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Such flexibility can be both a resource and a risk. With a flexible attitude, different forms of defence cooperation can be combined (e.g., cooperation with the USA and with Sweden) and a loyal Western role can be combined with that of communicator between East and West. However, the flexibility could also create uncertainty about Finland's position in international politics. For example, should Finland be

understood as a core European state or as a state strengthening transatlantic links, or perhaps as a state whose security policies are situated in a Nordic setting, with Sweden as a key partner?

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine these questions seem to have been answered by giving priority to predictability over flexibility and by taking additional steps towards the West. With political leaders from more or less all political camps signalling a positive attitude towards NATO membership, Finland is most likely to submit an application for membership during the summer of 2022. How this then will affect Finnish foreign policy in the long run, and especially the role as a communicator or even bridge-builder between East and West, is still too early to tell.

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