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FINLAND AND PROSPECTS FOR NATO MEMBERSHIP

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Finland's intentions vis-a-vis NATO are for many outsiders a puzzle. The issue also divides the Finnish public and its class politique. For some, the country which is not any more in the shadow of its Eastern neighbor, be it the USSR or Russia, has legitimate reasons to join the alliance that promises security and freedom. Finland should join all international organizations whose membership consists of democratic countries. For others, joining NATO would unnecessarily increase the vulnerability of the country in a crisis and thus even undermine its national security that is now based on strong territorial defense and general conscription.

Historical context of the Finnish (non)alignment

The divided opinion of the Finns on the relationship with NATO cannot be separated from the shadow cast by the Cold War as the divisions can be traced back to the political experiences during that period. The official view, promoted especially by Presidents J.K. Paasikivi (1946-1956) and Urho Kekkonen (1956-81), was that Finland should manage its relations with the Soviet Union on a bilateral basis and avoid any undue Western interference in them. In effect, NATO's policies, and the German role in them, were considered in Helsinki to have contributed to both the so-called note crisis in 1961, prompted in part by Soviet reactions to the Multilateral Force (MLF) plan in the Baltic Sea, and other problems in the Finnish-Soviet relations. Kekkonen's efforts to integrate Finland in Western European free-trade and payments arrangements were made contingent on

Moscow's approval of them in various bilateral deals.

The other view, which is surfacing now but could not be mentioned during the Cold War, was that the nuclear deterrence extended by the United States to Europe protected also Finland. In this perspective, NATO has been an alliance producing deterrence - and ultimately defense in the case of an attack - that contained the Soviet expansionist plans and thus protected the entire Europe. On the conceptual level this might have been the case, but contrary evidence is provided, for instance, by the meeting of the NATO Council held in the fall 1968 in the aftermath of the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces. Information leaked from this meeting hinted that in the case of the Soviet attack on Northern Europe, NATO would come to the rescue of Sweden but not of Finland.

The Finnish discussion on NATO is on one level a non-debate. Finland has been an

active member of the Partnership for Peace (PfP) and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) guiding its activities. In that context, the Finnish armed forces have been standardized to match the material and operational specifications of NATO. They have been tested and practiced in NATO-led crisis management operations, especially in Afghanistan in the northern part of which Finland has deployed a bit over 100 persons. Now Finland is sending additional 90 troops to protect the presidential elections of Afghanistan, but only on a temporary basis. Also the Finnish air fields and harbors are made compatible with potential joint operations with NATO. Technically, for Finland, the transition to a membership in NATO would be, in all likelihood, quick and smooth.

Arguments pro and con

The issue of the Finnish membership in NATO is, first of all, political in nature. Among the supporters of the membership, the argumentation moves on two different levels. The first level of arguments deals with the nature of the Finnish society and the influence exercised by the country on the international scene. According to this view, Finland as a democratic and market-based country should sit at the same table with other European countries sharing the same values. In so doing, Finland would also be able to exercise its legitimate influence on the decisions made in the alliance. It is felt that now, even though a member of the PfP, Finland is ostracized from the activities of NATO's inner core and placed on par, say, with the Central Asian countries. Because Finland is not, in the NATO context, in the right peer group, it was not, for instance, invited to the 60th anniversary summit of the Alliance in early April 2009.

Naturally, the supporters of the membership are aware of the demands that it would create obligations for Finland, but

they are routinely downplayed. To meet NATO's formal target of military spending, two per cent of the GDP should be used for that purpose. Today, Finland has allocated 1.4. per cent for this purpose. The standard response to costs of the membership in NATO is that now only seven NATO members meet this goal and that, in reality, the economic costs for Finland would be rather limited.

The first assessment of the issue by the Ministry of Defence in 2004 concluded that the additional costs of membership would be about 70 million euros, though the media received the piece of information with skepticism. The supporters of membership also tend to stress that even as a NATO member Finland will remain a sovereign country. Finland will decide itself whether it will stick in the future to the general conscription - which is, by the way, becoming an exception in Europe - and participate in specific crisis management operations. In other words, we would only gain and not lose anything.

Another level of argumentation concerns the national security of Finland. It is commonly said that it is too late to take insurance when the house is on fire. It is recognized that while the new assertiveness of Russia does not pose a direct threat to the Finnish security, it may have raised the political hurdles for applying for the membership. It is lamented by the supporters of membership that we should have applied in the 1990s when Russia was still weak. To accommodate Putin's and Medvedev's Russia, its potential threat should not be emphasized at all in public as a reason for applying the NATO membership. It is likely that in such a situation Moscow would probably react by political criticism which we should, however, stoically receive as the price that needs to be paid for a better choice.

The opponents of the membership fall in different factions. For some in the extreme left, it is enough to say that NATO is an imperialist alliance led by the United States that is bent to attack other countries, including Afghanistan and Iraq. If Finland were to join it, the likely outcome would be that our boys and girls will have to fight in the future imperial wars. This view is in a distinct minority in Finland. However, the Finnish participation in crisis management operations enters the national debate also in another way. In conservative circles, it is stressed that the main task of the Finnish armed forces is to defend the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its own country and not to participate too actively in foreign operations.

For the Finns, participation in international operations may be teaching useful lessons in the military arts, but it should be kept limited so that the capacity to defend the country's own territory is not jeopardized. In this respect, contrast is made with Sweden which that largely dismantled its territorial army and has invested instead heavily in international operations. Indeed, the official Swedish attitude is unflinchingly positive towards international operations (Sveriges samarbete... 2008). You can often hear in Finland a half-joke that Sweden can afford such a solution because there are 350.000 Finnish reservists standing between Russia and Sweden.

In sum, Finnish reservations about joining NATO spring in part from historical experiences and in part from political stances taken by various parties. Historically, it is deep in the Finnish *mentalité* that the country has had to defend its independence since 1917, primarily against the Soviet Union, by its own forces because no one else will come to our rescue at the moment of truth. This is not exactly true in empirical terms, but the view is ingrained deep in national thinking. This national conservative view is allied in an unholy relationship with

anti-Americanism which leads to oppose the membership in NATO for entirely different political reasons. Perhaps these views reflect two faces of Finnish nationalism; conservative and radical ones of which the former stresses independent statehood, while the latter combines nationalism with an alternative view of preferable international alignments.

One particular strand in the Finnish debate has concerned the changing nature of NATO. Both the critics and some supporters emphasize that NATO is still the old-fashioned military alliance with an iron-glad defense commitment embodied in Art. 5 of the North Atlantic Charter. The critics tend to argue that the defense commitment to the security of other NATO members would embroil Finland in war if the war breaks out in Europe.

A different perspective is offered by those who see NATO increasingly as a crisis management organization in which the defense clause is secondary due to the low likelihood of an interstate war in Europe between the members and non-members of NATO. While Russia is a cumbersome partner, the real test of NATO is in crisis areas such as Afghanistan. This intermediary view has appeared both in official documents and research reports (Effects of Finland's Possible... 2007; Salenius-Pasternak 2007).

Political opinions

Political divisions on the elite level mirror differences in the public opinion which have been fairly constant over the period since the 1990s when it became possible to ask in the polls about Finland's relationship with NATO. In the most recent comprehensive study of the Finnish public opinion on security and defense issues, published in December 2008, 60 per cent of the respondents felt that Finland should remain non-aligned and stay outside NATO, while 28 per cent favored military

alignment. The balance between the opponents and proponents has shifted slightly in the positive direction, but the biggest increase has been in the share of undecided respondents. In an empirical analysis, it turned out military alignment and independent defense are two main separate dimensions on security attitudes in the Finnish media debates (Rahkonen 2006).

The differences between the supporters of different political parties are rather stark. Among the supporters of the Conservative party, 62 per cent favored and 29 opposed the membership in NATO. Among the Center Party, the corresponding shares were 22 and 70 per cent, among the Social Democrats, 23 and 60 per cent, in the Left League, 3 and 88 per cent, and among the Greens, 22 and 67 per cent. Among the major parties, the Conservatives are the only one to have a solid support for the membership in NATO. This trend is accentuated by the fact that in the present government all of its key ministers in Finance, Foreign Affairs and Defense have openly spoken in favor of membership application.

In fact, this young and dynamic trio of Conservative politicians has by its behavior changed the tone of the Finnish debate on security and defense policies. It is interesting to note that the bourgeois government in Sweden has not embarked on a similar campaign for the NATO membership. On the other hand, a key personality among the Conservatives, Sauli Niinistö, has considered it unwise to apply for the NATO membership in directly, but rather support closer integration between the EU and NATO and thus associated with NATO through an indirect route (Niinistö is the former President of the Conservative Party, a former finance minister, and quite possibly the next President of Finland after 2012).

The road of Finland to NATO is complicated by the reluctance of most political parties to offend their supporters by speaking favorably on the application for membership. It has been openly stated that in the programs of last two governments that they will not apply for membership during their terms. This pledge has been maintained by the second Vanhanen government that is expected to rule until the next parliamentary elections in 2011. The program states briefly that the government will maintain and develop national defense, based on general conscription and territorial defense, and “preserves the possibility for applying a membership in NATO”. The program also stresses the importance of full-fledged participation in the common security and defense policy of the European Union (Government Programme 2007).

The common pledge of the government has also constrained the Conservatives who continue to say that while they are in favor of membership, they do not advocate the application for it to maintain consensus among the government parties. The situation is also shaped by the constitution according to which the President directs foreign policy in cooperation with the Government. The current President, Tarja Halonen, is widely perceived to be critical of the membership in NATO. The hands of the present government are tied both by its internal dissensus and the need to find a common line with the president.

There has been, however, a political shift towards a more positive description of NATO's functions in Europe and beyond, and its implications for Finland. The government Security and Defence Policy Report in 2004 stated that “Finland considers NATO to be an organization of key importance for military transatlantic security policy... In Finland's view, the development and functioning of EU-NATO cooperation is essential”. Against this backdrop, the Report concludes that

“applying for membership of the alliance will remain a possibility in Finland’s security and defence policy also in the future”.

The most recent governmental report on security and defense policy appeared in early 2009. The basic policy line on NATO is largely similar than in the previous report in 2004. The formulations chosen in 2009 are, however, somewhat more positive. Thus, Finland “regards NATO as the most important military security cooperation organization... and fosters wider transatlantic security policy cooperation through NATO”. The conclusion pretends to repeat the earlier formulations, but it comes out in a stronger form; there exist “strong grounds for considering Finland’s membership in NATO”, but this can happen only if there is a “broad political consensus” that also takes “public opinion into consideration”.

There are reasons to expect that the NATO issue will be reflected more strongly, and be more divisive, in the parliamentary elections in 2011 and presidential elections in 2012. On the other hand, none of the main parties might be willing to go to elections by advocating a membership in NATO as such a policy could be punished by voters whose majority does not like the idea. Moreover, any positive stance on NATO would open up divisive internal debates within especially the Center party and the Social Democrats.

The implications of membership

One analytical way to approach the Finnish alliance dilemma is to explore it in the light of theories on military alliances by the contrafactual method. The most typical starting point in alliance theories is the deterrence of the adversary that is expected to provide security for the members. Nuclear deterrence is said to be collective as it covers in principle all members, while conventional deterrence is partial and

depends on the level of military capabilities and their allocation between different theaters of potential war. In the real world, the effectiveness of deterrence is difficult to judge unless it is violated by an attack against one or more alliance members.

The alliance politics becomes, however, much more complicated if deterrence fails and the adversary attacks (in theories, the alliance and its leader rarely initiates the attack!). The critical issue is whether the alliance members come to help the target of the attack as promised in the defense pledges or whether the member is abandoned, in particular by the alliance leader. If the latter is the case, the commitments made in the alliance framework have proved to be baseless. The decision to abandon the ally may depend on whether the alliance leader perceives the attack on it to be unprovoked or whether the member has been itself at least partially a culprit and thus entrapped the leader in a conflict against its own will.

In other words, the commitment to defend allies depends on the degree of loyalty they have shown to the leader and other key members. The interplay between the commitment by the leader and the loyalty of members is shown, for instance, in the decision of Poland and the Baltic countries to send their forces in the harms way to Iraq in return of the expectation that the United States is serious about its commitment to defend them against an attack from outside.

This is also the reason why many of the new member states of NATO want to stress the importance of the defense commitment, embedded in Art.5, and link it with the participation in international crisis management. In the background, there is a doubt that the U.S. defense commitment is not as credible as it is said to be, partly because NATO has no concrete military plans to defend the new

members, including Baltic countries, against an attack. This problem is also reflected in the Polish insistence to deploy U.S. Patriot tactical air defense missiles on its territory as the price of letting Washington to place on its soil ten interceptor missiles for the strategic defense of the United States.

What has the contrafactual approach to offer to the discussion on Finland's relationship with NATO? Without going into the specifics of the method, it helps to ask what consequences alternative political choices might have. The application of such a method is heavily dependent on the premises adopted. In the present case, one premise is that Russia, the only conceivable potential enemy that Finland may have, does not have any aggressive designs on Finland in any foreseeable future. Another premise is that Finland will stick to its defense model of territorial defense and general conscription. This situation, which largely describes the present Finnish assumptions and policies, is in an equilibrium on which all key parties are satisfied.

A more challenging application of the contrafactual method is to ask what would happen if a serious military crisis breaks out in Europe and what will happen for Finland if it is or if it is not a member of NATO. One possibility is that its present defense arrangement is considered by other states to be credible and effective, and Finland will thus be able to stay outside the crisis. In other words, all parties would respect Finland's nonalignment and territorial integrity.

If Finland were a NATO member, and the alliance deterrence has failed as a result of the military attack, a key issue is whether the United States and other allies would perceive that Helsinki has entrapped them in a defensive mission in a remote corner of Europe by its own provocative actions. It is hard to believe that Finns, in any

circumstances, would deliberately provoke Russia to use military means in relations between the countries. Then the alliance commitments within NATO should be respected *bona fide*.

If Finland were even partially responsible for the crisis, then the problem of abandonment arises; will the United States and other member states come to the defense of the country. The matter is further complicated by the EU dimension if the Lisbon Treaty enters into force. The Finnish political opinion is divided on this issue; there are those who strongly believe that Washington is true to its declarations and will honor its commitments. On the other hand, there is also a realist conservative school which argues that neither the United States nor the leading EU states will ever engage themselves in a serious military manner in a secondary country having a 1300 kilometer long border with Russia.

Let us assume, in the contrafactual mode, that Finland is not a member of NATO in a situation of a deep military crisis in Europe. The remnants of the neutrality school in Finnish foreign policy making suggest that the country should stay outside the military alliance as it would save us from being a battlefield in a big war. This was, of course, the way of thinking among most of the Finnish elite, in particular among the Social Democrats and the centrist forces, in the second half of the 1930s. Then it was decided to stick to the Nordic line of neutrality and stress the legal sovereignty of the country.

This was expected to reassure the Soviet Union on the benign and neutral intentions of Finland even though, at the same time, the political, economic, and even military ties with Germany were growing stronger. This policy failed and has left a double legacy: on the one hand, it is argued that Finland should ally with a stronger power to obtain security guarantees while, on the

other hand, the history shows that no one will come, in a deep crisis, to our rescue. Therefore, it is better to prepare ourselves for all eventualities and stand proudly on our own ground.

The Stoltenberg report

Last year, the Nordic foreign ministers gave an assignment to the former Norwegian foreign and defence minister, Thorvald Stoltenberg, to gather an expert group of two persons from each of the Nordic countries and prepare a report on how to promote cooperation in foreign and security policies. In the background is the closer military and security cooperation that has evolved in recent years especially between a NATO country, Norway, and two non-aligned countries, Finland and Sweden. The report was released in February 2009 and carried clearly Stoltenberg's own fingerprints. The report contained a total of 13 recommendations.

Some of these proposals repeated and intended to reinforce the established Nordic approach to international cooperation. The report suggested the strengthening of the existing peacekeeping and crisis management operations by setting up a Nordic Stabilization Force and a joint war crimes investigation unit as well as promoting cooperation between Nordic foreign services. In the spirit of effective crisis management, it was also proposed in the report that a Nordic amphibious unit needs to be established to operate in coastal waters (the anti-piracy operations off the Somali coast might have been in mind).

Another set of proposals concerned the need to develop Nordic responses to environmental and strategic challenges faced in maritime areas. In concrete terms, the Stoltenberg report suggested that the Nordic countries should set up a maritime monitoring system both in the Baltic and Barents seas to follow up the state of the

environment and civilian naval traffic. There should also be a joint disaster response unit and a maritime response force and, perhaps, as the most ambitious proposal, the construction of a Nordic satellite system for monitoring changes in environmental and other civilian conditions.

In the military field, the report went far beyond the current arrangements. It proposed a Nordic resource network to protect against cyber attacks which makes sense and would complement the NATO outfit now in operation in Estonia. Less realistic is the proposal to start Nordic cooperation on surveillance of the Icelandic airspace. It is difficult to see where this idea emanates from and at least in Finland it has been received with scepticism (as NATO countries should be able to monitor the airspace of their member countries if the needs arise).

Even more disturbing is the proposal to issue a Nordic declaration of solidarity in which the five countries would pledge, in a binding manner, to specify the ways in which they would respond together to an attack or undue pressure against any of them. This would mean the revival of the old idea of Nordic defence alliance, albeit in new circumstances. It is highly unlikely that most of the Nordic countries would agree to issue such a declaration in a situation in which three of them have a mutual defence commitment in the NATO framework and three of them are waiting for the ratification in the European Union of the Lisbon Treaty that contains its own defence and solidarity clauses.

In sum, the Stoltenberg report contains several useful proposals on how to promote Nordic countries on several vital issues. On the other hand, it is an idiosyncratic report that adopts a very Norwegian perspective. It clearly tries to place Norway more in the centre of Nordic cooperation from its position as a NATO

member and non-member of the EU. At least from the Finnish perspective, the neglect in the Stoltenberg report of the EU as a viable actor in Northern Europe diminishes its value.

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