

Sorting out Finland's complicated attitude towards NATO

Toby Archer

Although not a member, Finland has had a long and complicated relationship with NATO, as exemplified by the current government's firm support of and contribution to the Alliance's missions, at the same time that it rejects NATO membership in line with Finnish public opinion. Ever since the end of the Cold War, and particularly since the demise of the Soviet Union, the question of whether Finland could or should join NATO has always been in the background of public discourse. The recently released government report on security and defence policy is perhaps the most positive government position ever taken on the alliance. But, as before, the report still does not take the final step of recommending that Finland should become a member of NATO.

The historical context

History, and particularly the history of neutrality, is central to understanding how the current Finnish government can be both positive about the idea of NATO and actively take part in the alliance's missions, yet still not want to join. Despite the heroic narratives of the 'defensive victory' of the Continuation War (1941-44), Finland emerged from the Second World War defeated and impoverished. It was not occupied by Russia, but lost significant amounts of its territory in Karelia, including its second-largest city, and had to resettle an eighth of its population who were made refugees and had severe political restraints placed upon it. In the post-war era, maintaining good relations with its superpower neighbour became the overwhelming national interest, and dissenting voices were marginalised and silenced to further this goal. Neutrality began as the only possible policy option that could maintain Finnish independence and democracy, but through the cold war era, it became fetishized to the extent that it actually began to compromise those core ideals.

Nevertheless, whilst the politicians turned neutrality into liturgy, the cold war was also a time of domestic growth and increasing economic success for the country. This allowed for the creation of a strong welfare state and increasing social equality. For Finns, social justice at home became linked to the neutrality policy internationally, particularly as the state used Nordic identity and cooperation as an important way of demonstrating to the west that it was a Scandinavian social democracy and not a Soviet client. There are numerous historical differences between Finnish and Swedish conceptions of neutrality, but still the Swedish ideas of Nordic peace and internationalist activism became linked to Finnish self-perceptions of neutrality, turning it for many from a tool of realist statecraft to a moral good in itself.

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Hence, at the end of the cold war, both Finnish society and the political establishment had moved from a purely instrumental idea of neutrality to an emotional commitment to the idea. Until Sweden announced that it would seek European Union membership in 1991, Finnish elites had been stating that Finnish neutrality meant that Finland could never join the EU. But for mainly economic reasons, the Finnish government decided that it also needed to apply and there were concerns that neutrality would complicate this. New terminology – military non-alignment – was created and this allowed Finland to join the EU alongside Sweden without causing huge political debate domestically. Being militarily non-aligned (to Russia) had always been the core aim of cold war neutrality anyway, and because ESDP plans were only embryonic as Finland was negotiating membership in the early 1990s, for non-specialists very little appeared to have changed with the new terminology.

Scepticism and cooperation

For Finns during the cold war, NATO was intimately connected to one of the two superpowers who were said to threaten Finnish security. The threat was never claimed to be direct, but the risk was that superpower conflict would envelope all of Europe, and Finland with it. At the end of the cold war NATO was therefore perceived as primarily a military organisation led by the United States. The Atlanticist view of NATO – of solidarity and working with like-minded, fellow democracies: a whole political community built upon the security community – was a marginal view in Finland, normally restricted to the more internationalist wing of the conservative National Coalition party. Hence NATO operations in Bosnia and particularly in Kosovo were met with widespread scepticism within the Finnish public debate.

The Advisory Board for Defence Information conducts regular and extensive public opinion polling of Finnish public attitudes on security and defence questions. Their data shows that opposition to NATO membership has remained almost consistent over recent years with only approximately one-quarter of Finns supporting joining the alliance. Nor is there a significant undecided bloc either, with only about one Finn in ten, and even less in recent years, not yet having made up their minds on the issue. This leaves a clear majority of approximately two-thirds opposed to membership. The polling in the autumn of 2008, which of course showed the effects of the Georgian war on Finnish opinion, did reveal an 11% drop in those who thought Finland should remain militarily non-allied, but interestingly this swing was absorbed almost completely by the "no opinion" option, rather than transferring to those who thought Finland should ally militarily. Secondly this question does not specify who Finland should ally with, but answering the specific question of whether Finland should join NATO, the Russia-Georgia conflict seemed to have no perceivable effect. The increase in support for membership from 2007 to autumn 2008 was less than the margin of error. A fear of Russian invasion remains the fundamental driver of Finnish defence policy, but even a Russian war on a smaller neighbour has not seemed to have changed the belief that Finns should prepare for their own defence rather than seek refuge in NATO.

Nevertheless, within government and foreign policy elites, there has always been an understanding that the US presence in Europe has been vital as the counterweight to the USSR/Russia. Even during the cold war, the US gave some low-key and at times covert support to Finland, or to factions within the Finnish political system. Hence, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finland began its formal and cooperative relationship with NATO with the understanding that NATO would remain central to European stability. Finland joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994, and the PfP Planning and Review Process (PARP) a year later. Through this procedure, Finnish troops have taken part in major NATO peacekeeping and crisis management operations: in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. Finland is currently increasing its troop commitment in the latter, and has commanded a sector in Kosovo. In Kosovo, the Finnish command was highly praised by its British counterpart for its professionalism and efficiency. Finland is also an active member of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC).

Although NATO secretary generals have carefully avoided involving themselves in what they see as internal Finnish politics on NATO, the alliance has always made it clear that Finland is very

welcome as a full member should it choose to join. Senior US officials have also publicly stated this. In Afghanistan, although the Finnish contingent is deployed in a reasonably stable northern area (one Finn has been killed by a roadside bomb), it is still arguable that this non-member state has shown more willingness to commit to the mission than some of the full members of the alliance.

Never-ending debate

As outlined in the "Finnish security and defence policy 2009" report, published by the government in January, the Finnish government regards NATO as a positive force in the world. It notes that Finland intends to further integrate with NATO by joining the NATO response force. The report states: "From now, strong grounds exist for considering Finland's membership of NATO. As regards a decision on possible membership, broad political consensus is essential, and it is important to take public opinion into consideration." The role of public opinion as a drag on any movement towards joining NATO was demonstrated last year when the foreign minister, Alexander Stubb, said that he viewed joining NATO positively. The prime minister, Matti Vanhanen, quickly said that Stubb's view was that of his party, the centre-right National Coalition, and not the view of the government. Nevertheless, Vanhanen heads the government that would only months later produce a security report that views NATO in such a positive manner. With a large majority of voters against NATO membership, the issue tends to be avoided in the run-up to elections, even by the parties that are not necessarily against Finland joining, yet the issue never fully goes away and events will sooner or later reignite the debate.

As argued above, the war in Georgia, whilst being very important to defence professionals in Finland, does not seem to have had a major impact on Finnish public opinion. Nor do provocations by Russia in recent years; a number of Russian officials have publically stated that counter-steps would be taken against Finland if it were to join NATO, and there have been numerous airspace violations by Russian military planes that many believe to be premeditated. Rather, if attitudes to NATO change in Finland it might be more to do with what America does, rather than Russia. During the Bush presidency, and in particular with the Iraq War, anti-NATO sentiments in Finland became mixed with wider anti-Americanism common across Europe. With the Obama administration's more cooperative attitude to working with allies and promises to work more through international organisation, full NATO membership may become more attractive. Yet there still remain countervailing forces – both European-level and Nordic-level defence cooperation has been much discussed in recent years within the Finnish debate and increasingly those opinion leaders who resist NATO point to these as alternative ways to guarantee Finnish security.

About EPIN

EPIN is a network of European think tanks and policy institutes with members in almost every member state and candidate country of the European Union. It was established in 2002 during the constitutional Convention on the Future of Europe. Then, its principal role was to follow the works of the Convention. More than 30 conferences in member states and candidate countries were organised in the following year.

With the conclusion of the Convention, CEPS and other participating institutes decided to keep the network in operation. EPIN has continued to follow the constitutional process in all its phases: (1) the intergovernmental conference of 2003-2004; (2) the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty; (3) the period of reflection; and (4) the intergovernmental conference of 2007. Currently, EPIN follows (5) the ratification process of the Lisbon Treaty and – should the treaty enter into force – (6) the implementation of the Treaty.

Since 2005, an EPIN Steering Committee takes the most important decisions. Currently there are six member institutes: CEPS, DIIS (Denmark), ELCANO (Spain), HIIA (Hungary), Notre Europe (France) and SIEPS (Sweden).

Status quo

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EPIN organises two major conferences in Brussels per year; as well as ad hoc conferences or other activities in member states. The network publishes Working Paper Series and other papers, which primarily focus on institutional reform of the Union. The network follows preparations for the European elections, the EU's communication policy, and the political dynamics after enlargement, as well as EU foreign policy and justice and home affairs.

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