

The changing concept of Finland's neutrality

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Abstract: Finland has been influenced by several great powers throughout its history. After independence in 1917, its foreign and security policy was determined by its relationship with Russia. The policy of neutrality emerged during the Cold War as a manoeuvring technique in the balancing act between East and West. After the Cold War, neutrality evolved into a military non-alignment policy. Its manifestation is that the country is in close cooperation with NATO, yet it is not a member. However, the question of accession has been raised several times recently.

Keywords: Finland, neutrality, NATO, military non-alignment, Finlandization

During the Cold War, Finland adopted a neutrality policy as the best option to pursue its foreign and security affairs. Thus, it was rather a necessity than an identity. Helsinki was determined to pursue a friendly policy towards Russia and approach the West without provoking its eastern neighbour. After its EU accession, the policy of neutrality could not be continued in the same way. However, the persistence of opting out of military alliances is returning into focus. Indeed, an increasing part of the population would support Finland's accession to NATO.

The path to Finland's neutrality

Historically, Finland's position in the international world order can be divided into three main eras: Swedish reign before 1809, the Russian period until 1917, and independent Finland since 1917. The Finnish tribes living without central power may have come under Swedish rule in the mid-12th century. Partly because of Swedish ambitions and partly because of the Russian Empire's great power policy eastern Finland and the Finnish coastline often became the scene of Swedish-Russian skirmishes and the target of Russian attacks. In 1808-1809, taking advantage of the 1807 Treaty of Tilsit with Napoleon, Russian Tsar Alexander I. conquered Finland, and the country became an independent Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire. It was given extensive autonomy, leading to the development of a Finnish nationalism during the 19th century.¹

Intentions of Finland's "Russification" were strengthened from the late 1800s, including the presence of Russian troops, equalising the rights of Russian and Finnish citizens, and arresting nationalist leaders. Finally, Finland declared its independence in 1917, taking advantage of the weakness of Russia because of the losses during the First World War and the 1917 Russian Revolution. The independence fighters enjoyed the support of the Bolsheviks in Russia, who used Finland's case against the Provisional Government. Lenin's Bolshevik government was the first in the international community to recognise Finland's independence in 1917.²

In the shadow of great powers' interests

During the first half of the 20th century, Finland lived in the shadow of Russian and German interests. In the First World War, Finland, being a Russian Grand Duchy, stayed away from the frontline and did not participate directly in the war. Because of its proximity to Petrograd, it could theoretically have been the target of German attacks, so it was put on a defensive status, and Russian troops were stationed there. In 1917 a civil war broke out to fill the power vacuum after Finnish independence was declared. The interests of the great powers were already shown: the opposing sides were supported by the Bolshevik Russian revolutionaries and Germany.³

During the inter-war period, Finnish foreign policy was characterised by suspicion and hostility towards the Soviet Union. Although it declared itself neutral, it sought defence cooperation with the Baltic countries; thus, its foreign policy could not satisfy the Soviet security concerns. The Finnish–Soviet Non-aggression Pact was signed in 1932. However, it failed to dispel Finland's fears of Soviet expansionism, which, as it later turned out, was not unjustified. Eventually, Finland could not avoid getting involved in the Second World War.

The aftermath of the Second World War

As a result of the German–Soviet Non-aggression Pact (Molotov – Ribbentrop Pact) in 1939, Finland fell within the Soviet sphere of influence. Besides the annexation of the Baltic states, there was a Soviet demand to acquire certain areas of Finland to extend the protection of Leningrad from a potential German invasion. The rejection of Soviet territorial claims by Finland led to the outbreak of the “Winter War” in 1939. Although the war resulted in Finnish territorial and financial losses and Finland's entry into the Second World War in 1941, the Soviet Red Army also suffered heavy losses. Despite being defeated and forced to accept the Soviet terms, Finland could keep its independence during the war. Ending the Second World War with even greater territorial losses for the benefit of the Soviet Union, Soviet - Finnish relations were to be normalised within the framework of the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in 1948.⁴

The Treaty of Friendship declared that Finland is committed to staying out of international conflicts between the great powers, and it seeks to maintain peace in line with the UN's principles. Moreover, it limited the opportunity of Finnish defence cooperation with third parties. Finland was committed to activate joint military consultations with the Soviet Union, if needed, and the treaty ruled out military alignment with Western countries. It has therefore not joined NATO or the Warsaw Pact. Emphasising the commitment to the Friendship Treaty, Finland chose not to participate in the Marshall Plan after the Second World War.⁵

Although signing the Treaty might seem to have made neutral status impossible for Finland, it was the necessary step to normalise the relationship with the Soviet Union and, thus, envisage the neutral foreign policy. But to achieve that, the country also needed political leaders with the right foreign policy direction.

Finland's neutrality during the Cold War

As the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance imposed the cornerstone of the Finnish foreign policy, the country's neutrality during the Cold War era was strongly influenced by the "Paasikivi – Kekkonen line", named after two presidents of Finland, Juho Paasikivi and Urho Kekkonen.

Juho Paasikivi, president of Finland from 1946 to 1956, established nonprovocative and friendly politics towards the Soviet Union, which was based on the conviction that the Russian interest in Finland is based on security reasons, and its objectives in this regard can be achieved without occupation or other aggressive action. In exchange for the friendly, co-operative politics, Paasikivi expected the Soviet Union to accept Finland's independence and own foreign policy. The first real period of *détente* came after the death of Stalin, as the Soviet Union's foreign policy became less aggressive. It withdrew its military base from around Helsinki, and Finland could become member of the United Nations and the Nordic Council in 1955. By that, Finland's international isolation decreased and the autonomy from the Soviet Union increased.⁶

Kekkonen succeeded Paasikivi as president of Finland from 1956 to 1982, and further developed the policy of active neutrality. His aim was to create a bridge between the East and the West, and to achieve this, he strongly supported the idea of a neutral Nordic defence union. During the 1960s and 1970s Finland has indeed taken a more active foreign policy role and increased its autonomy. Helsinki hosted the Conference of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 1975, resulting in the Helsinki Final Act, and the country became member of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA).⁷ Giving room to Soviet influence in Finnish domestic and foreign policies was part of Kekkonen's co-operative policy towards the Soviet Union. An example for the latter is the refrainment from publicly criticising the Russian military interventions in Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Afghanistan (1979) by Finnish political leaders.

In summary, the Finnish intentions to pursue active neutral policy consisted of staying independent from Moscow but in exchange not to approach the West too much, so that

it would insult Russian strategic interests. Although, the Soviet Union denied Finnish neutrality, the country could avoid the military engagement in practice. The neutral status of Finland was only acknowledged by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989. However, by the post–Cold War times, neutrality was seen much more as an obstacle from getting engaged with the Western institutions.

Neutrality: rather a necessity than identity

During the Cold War, neutrality appeared in the Finnish foreign policy as the best option to allow as much Western orientation as possible without hurting the Russian strategic interests. The fact, that it was not part of the Finnish identity is shown by the country's intentions to become a committed EU member, whereby neutrality happened to be rather a burden. Although to the 1990s - including Finnish accession to the EU in 1995 - were referred as the “golden era” regarding the Finnish Western identity, it was highly criticised from the aspect of neutrality.

The orientation and identity of Finland was further justified by the willingness to join more Western institutions. Paavo Lipponen, prime minister of Finland from 1995 to 2003, defined neutrality as a policy of the Cold War, which ended with those decades. However, among other neutral countries, Finland was perhaps the most precarious. Its foreign policy was never separated from the principles of the 1948 Treaty with the Soviet Union, which was later extended in 1955, 1973, and 1983.⁸

It is therefore clear, that the Finnish neutrality should not be interpreted under international law, but rather as a political statement of the country. It referred to the way it intended to pursue international relations, not to join military alliances, to conduct a relatively independent foreign policy, maintain friendly relations and avoid conflicts. By joining the UN, neutrality became more associated with active foreign policy, since instead of isolationism, it gave the opportunity to play a mediator role in international disputes.

From the 1950s, the concept of “Finlandization” was used to describe the undesirable Finnish model of neutrality. It implied that Finland agreed to limit its independence as a price to maintain stable relations with the Soviet Union. Although it avoided military invasion, it was in Moscow's grip. However, there is a fundamental difference from being an ally of the Soviet Union for example from Romania at that time, from the

ideological point of view: instead of adjusting to Stalinism, Finland remained a liberal democracy.⁹

Neutrality beyond the Cold War era

As Finnish neutrality is described as a policy pursued during the Cold War, one might have expected that with the end of this era, the neutral policy of the country would also come to an end. Using the words of the British political scientist, David Arter, the Finnish neutrality “*had been a designer neutrality, designed to the particular requirements of Finland’s post-war situation and tailored to the realities of the nation’s Ostpolitik...*”¹⁰ It is indeed true, that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War changed the Finnish foreign and security policy, and resulted in the “narrowing down” of the concept of neutrality to the military dimension. It can be best illustrated by the country’s attitude towards the NATO and the EU. Although it follows the European Security and Defence Policy and also cooperates with the NATO, it seems committed not to give up the policy of military non-alignment.

Finland in the European Union

A huge step towards the West was Finland’s accession to the European Union in 1995. It was preceded by a referendum in the previous year, which resulted in 57% in favour of joining the EU. It was the sign that the country’s Cold War era role as a buffer between the East and the West has come to an end.¹¹

As for the economic integration, Finland joined lots of bi- and multilateral trade agreements since the 1950s, so it could separate its economic interests from the political sphere. Its relationship with the Soviet Union did not allow Finland to establish close relations with the European economic institutions. It became full member of the European Free Trade Agreement only in 1986, however, it was concerned of being left out from the even closer European economic relations in the framework of the European Economic Community. Since the Soviet Union was a significant trading partner of Finland, after its collapse, the small Nordic country had key interests in finding new markets in the West. After 1991 the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty and the 1948 Mutual Friendship Treaty with the former Soviet Union became obsolete and

restrictions of Finland's means for defence expired. Accessing the EU in 1995, Finland automatically became member of the newly established European Economic Area, which provided even more beneficial economic relations for its members.¹² It was the requirements of EU membership that transformed the Cold War era neutrality into a military non-alignment focused foreign policy.

Among other new EU members at that time, which were also pursuing neutral foreign policy, such as Austria and Sweden, Finland accepted to take part in the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) within the EU. But this could not be achieved by remaining at the Cold War model of neutrality. Finland's post-Cold War era neutrality concept adapted to the new circumstances and it changed its status to military non-alignment. Because of the CFSP Finland no longer pursued the policy of neutrality, it prioritised crisis management over the traditional territorial defence. As the CFSP and with that the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has developed, the Lisbon Treaty (2009) already included the mutual assistance clause (Article 42.7) and the solidarity clause. According to Article 42.7, if an EU member state is attacked, the other members have to provide assistance by all the means within their power. As it referred to territorial defence commitments, Finland had to make its defence status clear again in the 2000s. Because of its EU membership, it could not remain militarily completely non-aligned, so it redefined its status by stating that it does not become member of any military alliance. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea resulted in a more active Finnish participation in the EU's security and defence policy. It improved its bilateral defence cooperation with Sweden, the US, and also within the framework of the Nordic Defence Cooperation and the NATO partnership. It also joined several European defence formats.¹³ As a result of the last decade's improvements, Finland is referring less and less to not being militarily allied, in its foreign and security policy.

Finland is actively participating in the EU's defence system since the 2000s, proven by its strong support for various initiatives, such as the European Defence Fund, Coordinated Annual Review (CARD), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Strategic Compass. It hosts the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki since its establishment in 2017.¹⁴ As for crisis management, Finland participates in various operations (such as OSCE, NATO and the UN), just to mention some, the Finnish Army contributed to EUFOR Althea, NAVFOR Somalia,

EUTM Mali, EUTM Somalia, EUNAVFOR MED Irini and EUTM RCA.¹⁵ Given its geographical location next to Russia, it is likely that Finland will continue to support the deepening of the EU's CSDP. However, the situation regarding NATO is somewhat different from that of the EU, as the former is primarily a military alliance.

NATO Partnership

During the Cold-War, the relationship with the Soviet Union based on the Mutual Friendship Treaty, determined Finland's sensitivity towards NATO. However, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Finland started to improve its defence relations not just with Europe but within the broader transatlantic context. It joined the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 1994 along with Sweden. They both participate in PfP exercises, courses and were contributing to NATO missions, such as IFOR and SFOR in Bosnia, KFOR in Kosovo and also in Afghanistan and Iraq. They cooperate with the alliance in many more areas, including the membership in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, the establishment of diplomatic missions to NATO and participation in the NATO Response Force.¹⁶ All this underpins that both cooperate with NATO in almost every area without accepting Article 5. In 2014, at the Wales Summit, Finland became NATO Enhanced Opportunity Partner, meaning even deeper dialogue and cooperation and aims further military development and interoperability.

Until today, the reasons of not joining NATO can be found in historical, identity-based arguments about Finland's commitment to non-alignment. Although formally it is not member of any military alliance, it maintains deep and close defence relations with NATO without provoking Russian interests unnecessarily.

“NATO-option”

After the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, the option of Finnish (and Swedish) accession to full NATO membership had already emerged. Many thought that the two countries will reconsider becoming members of the military alliance to ensure protection in case of potential further Russian aggression. However, for countering such a dramatic scenario, Finland might have other options. These include its far-reaching defence cooperation with Sweden, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF) and also the EU (specifically Article 42.7).

As for Finland's geographical location, the possible accession to NATO would mean serious concerns for Russia. Namely, Finland is directly bordering the Kola Peninsula, where the majority of Russian nuclear second-strike capability is allocated.¹⁷

Clinging to what is left of its neutrality, the public opinion did not shift drastically towards NATO accession after the Crimean annexation. Although, opinion favouring it is trending upwards: in 2015, 27% of the population voted for joining the military alliance. It was roughly the same in the previous year, however, it was only 17% in 2012. In comparison to the public opinion in Sweden, in 2015, 41% of the Swedish population was in favour of accession.¹⁸ These results show that, despite the similarities between the two countries due to their neutrality, the common history with Russia, the 1,300 km-long border and the proximity define Finland's foreign and security policy in a very different way. Still, NATO's doors are open, and the option of Finnish accession is being kept on the table.

Current events, the full-scale Russian invasion against Ukraine since 24 February 2022, made a significant impact on Finnish public perceptions on NATO. According to a recently released poll, 53% of the Finns would support the country's accession, 28% are against and 19% did not take a position.¹⁹ These results show a historical shift in comparison with previous years (shown in the chart below)²⁰.

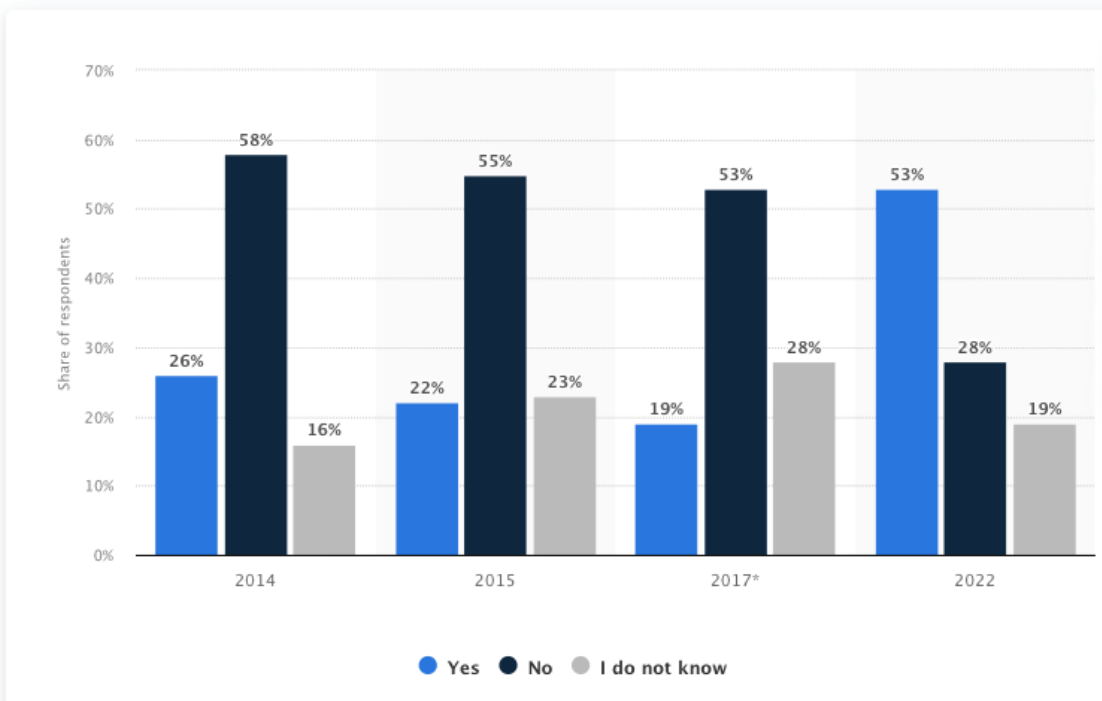


Figure 1: Should Finland join NATO? Opinion development on Finland joining NATO 2014-2022. Source: Statista

"Finlandization"

Reacting to the current Russian-Ukrainian war, the idea of the "Finlandization" of Ukraine emerged again on many media platforms. Although the idea is not new, it has already been under discussion in 2014. If Ukraine was to follow the Finnish Cold War model of neutrality, it would serve as a neutral buffer between the West and the East. The reason why lots of political leaders and scholars stand by this concept is that they believe Russian aggression would stop if Moscow did not feel "encircled by the NATO". However, this argument is contradicted by more factors. Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, former Secretary-General of NATO stated that Ukraine is clearly not going to become NATO member in the foreseeable future, so it is already a buffer country.²¹ One obvious reason behind it is the instability of its borders. It is therefore more likely that what Putin wants is the assertion of Russian interests in Ukraine. Former Portuguese Secretary of State for European Affairs, Bruno Maçães pointed out that what Russia wants is not a neutral Ukraine, but a Russian one.²² Also, Finland's strict neutrality during the Cold-War era was determined by the 1947 Peace Treaty, including the clear definition of its borders. However, when thinking about Donbass or Crimea, in Ukraine it is not the case.

Conclusions

Finland's neutrality does not have deep historical roots and it did not allow the country to escape from participating in the world wars. Its unique foreign and security policy was developed during the Cold-War era as a necessity. It seemed to be the best option to manoeuvre between the West and the East. Indeed, it is because of its specific characteristics that it cannot truly be seen as a model for others to follow.

The changing circumstances after the downfall of the bipolar world order led to the transformation of Finnish neutrality to military non-alignment. Although it did not apply for full NATO membership, they created close bilateral and regional defence relations. The policy of military non-alignment means that Finland does not access NATO formally however, this does not exclude the potential response of the country in case of an emergency. Although the current Ukrainian war can bring a change in Finland's

position, that no doubt would bring a strong Russian response. The future membership in NATO is a question, however the public attitude regarding this has definitely changed.

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