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**FINLAND'S RELATION WITH NATO
IN THE SHADOW OF RUSSIA**

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Finland's Relations with NATO in the Shadow of Russia

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In Finland, the NATO Summit in Wales was anticipated to pave the way for a yet deepened partnership, but also to considerably impact on the security environment of Finland.⁽¹⁾ The Summit may have clarified NATO's primary role in territorial defence, but it did not make it easier for Finland to take a stand on an eventual membership.

High on Finland's agenda was the question about how to renew and reinvigorate its partnership. Together with Sweden, it saw a need to develop partnerships for post-conflict management times, when the possibilities to gain experience directly from the field in NATO operations were diminishing. In terms of capacity development and interoperability, the importance of joint exercises grows instead. Finland and Sweden were also looking for regular dialogue and predictability, closer and earlier involvement in planning, and in all, a partnership that is a match of both sides' actual needs.

In the Summit, both countries signed a Host Nation Support agreement with NATO. This may have been a logical and long-planned, pragmatic step in the development of their partnerships. But in the context of the crisis in Ukraine and the change of profile of NATO, it gained new connotations and certainly led to much heated debate.

The controversiality of the agreement stemmed from the new situation. With NATO returning to territorial defence as its primary task, and having already increased its presence in the Baltic Sea area to respond to the worries of its member countries in the region, an agreement about NATO troops on the territory of Sweden and Finland, offering help in a

crisis, was seen in a new light. In what circumstances would it be put in practice? What would the implications be?

In Finland, the debate was seen to need some dampening. The Minister for Foreign Affairs noted that the agreement had been wrongly understood, and was in fact a mere “protocol concerning maintenance”.⁽²⁾ Stress was put on Finland’s complete sovereignty in deciding on an eventual use of the protocol.

At the same time, the substantial meaning of such an agreement becomes visible in just this kind of a situation. It can be beneficial for both parties. NATO may find Finland’s and Sweden’s role in the Baltic Sea region fundamental for its own purposes, while these countries indeed may one day need help or may want indirectly to help NATO that seeks higher readiness.

For Finland, paradoxically, the more NATO relations matter in practice, the more consequential they are, the more problematic they become. Most countries debating NATO membership refer either to concrete security needs or to a general community of values that they want to commit to and stress the change that membership would imply for them. For Finland, pragmatic small steps that minimize the change have been the preferred option. Now, however, the crisis in Ukraine makes all low-key proceeding increasingly thorny. Every move and every statement is seen in a new light: even a feather falling is heard.

Fundamentally, the question of NATO is about Russia, both for those against membership and for those for it. Has anything moved, then? Joining NATO might be easier than ever. Some believe other NATO countries might have difficulties in accepting Finland as a member in these conditions. Still, the Alliance would not have much choice, as a refusal of Finnish membership could be seen as giving Russia a veto over NATO enlargement.

Support for NATO membership has not significantly grown. Some political parties are seen to have changed their stand somewhat, the Centre Party and the Greens having become more favourable. Public opinion has not considerably altered, if not in relation to Russia that is now perceived as more threatening. Yet, this may rather lead to a propensity to increase defence spending rather than to joining NATO.

The central question, however, is no longer 'what NATO', but 'what Russia'? Thus far, the feeling has been that Finland knows its Russia and how to handle it. Finland has tried to work against sharp divisions between Russia and the West, being committed to the EU as well as to good relations with Russia. Now, tightening sanctions are becoming a problem for Finland. They have led the country to stress the importance of bilateral relations and continuing cooperation as broad as possible while waiting for better times to return. Still, the sanctions may start harming not only the short-term trade, but also long-term economic and energy plans with Russia, notably in Arctic shipbuilding and nuclear power plant construction. The more fundamental problem, however, is that Finland may be torn apart from mainstream EU, and still not be able to keep the relations with Russia as they were. There seems to be a new degree of unpredictability when it comes to Russia: can it be taken for granted that 'good relations' continue being good for Finland?

In this situation, a typically cautious way forward is to commission a study. The government and the President's office have commissioned one that should give an updated view of all Finnish security and defence cooperation. After the parliamentary elections in April next year (if not earlier), the new government needs to draw some conclusions. Hardly directly proposing NATO membership, it is not likely to go back to earlier wordings, either. The two sentences of the Katainen government programme already left out in the current Stubb programme, namely 'Finland will strengthen its close and wide-ranging bilateral relations with the Russian Federation', and 'Finland will not prepare a [NATO] membership application during this Government's term of office',⁽³⁾ will hardly reappear as such. The need to reconsider relations with NATO appears of less urgency if there seems to be a growing need to reconsider the Finnish-Russian relations.

NOTES

- 1) Chief of Defence Jarmo Lindberg in *Helsingin Sanomat* 22 August 2014 (p. A 13).
- 2) Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja according to the YLE radio, 5 September 2014.
- 3) See the programs at the Government website <http://valtioneuvisto.fi/hallitus/en.jsp>.