

Discussion Article

Adieu neutrality: The dwindling power of Nordic non-alignment

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Abstract

With the decisions of Finland and Sweden to join NATO, a long chapter of Nordic neutrality is suddenly closed. This article examines the often misunderstood term ‘neutrality’ and the problems of finding a single definition relevant to post-Cold War politics. It then looks at the unique role and high profile that the Nordics have enjoyed in diplomacy and peacekeeping. Finally, it asks if NATO membership for Sweden and Finland is detrimental to international diplomacy and conflict resolution.

Keywords

Nordic, neutrality, NATO, diplomacy

Introduction

One immediate consequence of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was the accession first of Finland, and then in March 2024 of Sweden, into NATO. This was a significant subtraction from the small number of western European states committed to a policy – or philosophy – of neutrality. Those still standing are Austria, the Republic of Ireland, Malta, and Switzerland, but unlike Finland, none of them share a border with Russia. That said, Russian brinkmanship and threats have extended far beyond its borders. For example, Dmitry Kiselyov, the Kremlin-aligned broadcaster, spoke of Russia using nuclear weapons off Ireland’s Atlantic coast to send a tsunami over the British Isles (The Irish Times, 2022). Threats against Sweden significantly helped shift opinion in the country. To quote Gunilla Herolf of the Swedish Institute of International Affairs: “As for Swedes, the realisation that their country may be a future target for Russia came already in 2013. The decisive event was when on Easter Friday, 2013, Russian bomber planes made a mock attack on Stockholm and southern Sweden, turning away just outside the territorial border” (TPQ, 2022). It is a classic self-fulfilling prophecy: the Kremlin’s attempts to stop the eastward enlargement of NATO have ensured that it has come to pass.

Could it have been different, that is, was European security vis-a-vis Russia mismanaged following the Cold War? There is certainly a robust debate about the end of the Cold War and European security among historians and IR scholars. The maximalist position, as extolled by John Mearsheimer, is that NATO expansion caused the Ukraine War. In a recent interview, he stated: “The responsibility for this war, in my opinion, lies squarely in the West and really in Washington” (Judging Freedom, 2024). A more midway position is held by scholars like Richard Sakwa, who wrote in 2017 that “Russia was subjected to various forms of ‘soft containment’ which has hardened over time. The crisis in Ukraine in 2014 was a symptom and not the cause of the breakdown in European security” (Sakwa, 2017). Prior to him, there were others, most notably George Kennan, the theorist of the Cold War policy of containment, who insisted that NATO enlargement was a bad idea and would be resisted by Russia. Interestingly, the arguments for and against enlargement did not fall neatly into left vs right on the political spectrum. To quote British conservative Peter Hitchens: “Not many causes unite Chomsky and Kissinger. The folly of NATO expansion is one” (X, 2022). Unfortunately, we will never know what type of Russia might have emerged in the 1990s had things been different, but we have ample evidence of the type of Russia we are dealing with, hence the huge shift away from neutrality in the security thinking of Sweden and Finland. The term *neutrality* itself is also worth examining.

Defining neutrality

An editorial of DLP (Diplomacy, Law, Policy) defines neutrality as: “Under customary international law, all states have the right to refrain from engaging in an armed conflict by adopting neutral status. The law of neutrality confers rights (notably that of inviolability) and imposes duties (of impartiality and abstention) on neutral states as well as belligerents in regard to neutral states (to respect their impartiality and insist upon their inviolability)” (DLP, 2023). The law is grounded in The Hague Conventions V and XIII (1907). The authors go on to note that this was an era in which states issued declarations of war before engaging in conflict, and there was a somewhat clearer demarcation between war and peace than currently exists. States no longer declare war and therefore “the law of neutrality has been subject to some criticism for being outdated” (Ibid, 2023).

Writing in 2011, Christine Agius and Karen Devine noted the difficulty of finding a single definition for neutrality post-Cold War; they spoke of “the current era of post-neutral, former neutrals, military non-aligned and non-allied states...”. This was in response to a 1999 article by Laurent Goteschel

which argued that neutrality still had value but decreasing relevance. The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in eastern Ukraine have changed the landscape from *post*-Cold War to something closer to *neo*-Cold War. It hardly needs to be said that this polarisation has increased since February 2022.

The definitions of neutrality in the remaining non-aligned European countries are not identical; for example, Switzerland's 'armed neutrality' shields it from some external criticism. Such criticism argues that western European neutrals are benefiting from NATO without contributing to it, yet alone making sufficient provision for their own defence. For example, Franz-Stefan Gady writes "Naturally, this security free-riding is breeding resentment among non-neutrals, most of which spend a significantly higher share of GDP on defence or have plans to do so. Austria, Ireland, and Malta expect others to fight on their behalf, while they are unwilling to do the same for their neighbors" (Foreign Policy, 2023).

Neutrality is sometimes confused rather vaguely with a form of high idealism that pervades all aspects of society. For example, Swedish author Gunnar Ardelius wrote that "We still cling to the creed that we are a peaceful society for example, but no other country in Europe shows increases in gun violence comparable to that in Sweden" (Guardian, 2024). Why is there a conflation here of a consistent foreign policy stance and a recent increase in domestic crime rates? The Republic of Ireland has maintained neutrality for a century yet has a tradition of domestic political violence, but the latter does not invalidate the former. Indeed, it might be the recent memory of bloodshed that preserves a commitment to neutrality.

It must be noted that Sweden and Finland were not identical in terms of neutrality. Sweden had been called a 'moral superpower' whereas Finland's low-key approach during the Cold War gave the term 'Finlandization' to the political lexicon. (Oceans of ink have been spilled on this phrase, and it need not be revisited here.) However, the policies of both countries reflected some of the better values of Nordic society: democracy, egalitarianism, and a belief in international law and the value of diplomacy. The contributions of the Nordics to international peacekeeping and diplomacy are striking – even if Denmark is not as prominent. Two out of nine UN Secretary Generals (Norwegian Trygve Lie and Swedish Dag Hammarskjöld) were from the region, as were several other high-ranking UN staff, such as Gunnar Jarring and Max Jacobson, and the most prestigious global peace prize in the world – the Nobel – is awarded by Norway. Helsinki hosted the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which promoted *détente* in the 1970s.

In particular, peacekeeping efforts in the Middle East have been prominent, if not always appreciated or successful. From the Jarring Mission to the Oslo Accords, Nordic diplomacy has tried to mitigate or even end the seemingly intractable Arab/Israel conflict. Finland's military credibility has secured a role in these processes; the first Finnish UN peacekeepers were deployed to Egypt following the 1956 Suez Crisis, and later General Ensio Siilasvuo would also coordinate disengagement and peacekeeping following the 1973 Yom Kippur War. His memoirs offer insights into the difficulties and frustrations of peacekeeping missions, as well as a generous and affectionate portrait of the Middle East and its peoples (Siilasvuo, 1992).

In addition to the most prominent post-World War 2 Swedish diplomats, the above-mentioned Hammarskjöld (1905-1961), and Olof Palme (1927-1986), it is worth recalling two prominent wartime diplomats, both of whom were instrumental in saving tens of thousands of lives from Nazi camps. These were Raoul Wallenberg (1912-disappeared 1945), and Count Folke Bernadotte (1895-1948). All four men died unnatural deaths, although only Bernadotte's is clearly a politically-motivated murder – he was shot by the Israeli paramilitary Stern Gang. Wallenberg died under Soviet imprisonment,

although the year has not been established beyond doubt. Hammerskjöld died in the line of duty trying to resolve the Katanga breakaway crises in the Congo, although it remains to be proven if the fatal plane crash was caused deliberately. Unresolved too is the reason for, and agent of, Palme's assassination in Stockholm. It is worth emphasising the loss of life because, to its critics, neutrality often implies a lack of commitment.

Neutral and/or NATO-sceptical?

In a present day European, and more specifically Nordic, context, neutrality is often shorthand for non-NATO. This either/or definition has been amplified recently with the accession of Finland and Sweden. Certainly, NATO has always had Western critics. Among them was Mauno Koivisto who served as Finnish President from 1982 to 1994. He stated in an interview that the argumentation was always negative, based on what Finland will miss out on by not joining the alliance (YLE, 2003).

Other critics of NATO have been far more direct in their argumentation. Simon Jenkins is one; "NATO was founded in 1949 in response to Stalin's blockade of Berlin. It was intended to 'keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down'. Since then, it has welcomed the American nuclear shield, at vast cost to America. Otherwise, its only military achievements have been the breakup of Yugoslavia and the loss of a squalid 17-year war in Afghanistan. Neither has anything to do with the North Atlantic" (Jenkins, 2018). This critical judgement pre-dates NATO's final denouement in Afghanistan. This was a massive failure by any measure; the televised images of people literally clinging to, and falling from, departing Western aeroplanes, evoked the fall of Saigon in 1975. The cold facts were that after 20 years, NATO-led forces withdrew from Afghanistan but left in place the Taliban regime they had gone there to remove from power. The Soviets, in *their* occupation of Afghanistan, had cut their losses and departed after eight years.

There are troubling reports of potential war crimes committed by NATO forces (and other combatants) in Afghanistan. There have been investigations and prosecutions by the US, Australia, and other countries of their armed forces. Were the investigations and prosecutions sufficient in scale? Voices from the Global South think not. To quote one highly-charged Chinese opinion piece:

NATO, the world's most powerful military alliance, has earned itself a reputation for brutality. In the name of freedom and democracy they came, and in the name of protecting the people they inflicted harm. Those who are most vocal about defending human rights have committed some of the most horrible crimes against humanity. Action is long overdue. The innocent people are crying out for justice. It is time to put the perpetrators in the dock and hold them accountable. (Global Times, 2022).

This is worth quoting not for its objectivity, but rather because this is the harsh light by which NATO actions are judged by many around the globe. They see double standards that seem to favor the Atlantic countries, especially the United States. Sweden and Finland will now be lumped together with an alliance that is viewed with some hostility by the Global South. During the negotiations to end the Kosovo War in 1999, Finland was an ideal partner because of its (then) good relations with Russia, whose presence was needed to reassure the Yugoslav/Serbian government. It did not seem to matter that the chief negotiator – the late President Martti Ahtisaari – was himself strongly pro-NATO; Finland's neutrality was trusted. Such moments in international diplomacy will now surely be less frequent, if they are even possible, at least at state level. This is lamentable, but new security realities have presented themselves.

“Neutrality facilitates offering good offices”

Speaking in October 2023, Gilles Carbonnier, the Vice-President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, made a robust defence of neutrality. Noting that “Conflicts often result in extreme polarization. Everyone is expected to take sides”, he continued “Yet, the ICRC always strives to preserve a space for neutral and impartial humanitarian action.”

Remaining neutral does not mean that the ICRC does not care about the humanitarian consequences of armed conflict, or that we do not take action. To the contrary! Neutrality is what allows us to fulfill our mandate. Remaining neutral is a condition to reach people affected by armed conflict and provide them with assistance. (ICRC, 2023)

With Swiss neutrality in mind, Marco Sassòli writes: “Neutrality facilitates offering good offices, including the role of ‘international Geneva’”. He continues “Neutrality is profoundly anchored in the self-perception of the Swiss people. They are convinced that it preserved them from the horrors of three major wars in Europe during the last 150 years. Finally, neutrality also decisively contributes to the particularity of Switzerland, in particular in the eyes of public opinion in the Global South” (The Defense Horizon Journal, 2023).

Sweden, to a very high degree, and Finland, to a lesser extent, have been able to offer ‘good offices’ for international diplomacy, arbitration, and peace-keeping. One high-profile case was the 1999 Račak controversy in Kosovo. Two forensic teams were allowed to examine the corpses at the site of the massacre. One was a joint Belarussian/Yugoslav team and the second a Finnish team working on behalf of the EU led by Dr. Helena Ranta. Only the findings of the latter were considered credible by the international community.

A distinguished chapter of Nordic diplomacy has now come to an end. Formal re-alignment will diminish the possibility of such good offices in the future, although individual bodies like the Helsinki-based Crisis Management Initiative will continue their work in conflict resolution, but operating below state level.

Meanwhile, some countries currently under questionable regimes have offered their services as ‘honest brokers’ in international conflict. These include Belarus and China in the Russian war on Ukraine and some of the Gulf States and Turkey (itself a NATO member) in the Gaza war. Liudmyla Kuriosikova assesses China’s intentions thus: “China’s position emphasises its ‘neutrality’ on the grounds that it is not a ‘related party on the crisis of Ukraine’, but at the same time, it strengthens its relations with Russia.” These relations entail “deepening China-Russia ‘no-limits partnership’ and have led to significant economic and military collaboration” (GMF, 30 July 2024).

Authoritarian Turkish President Erdogan has offered his services “to mediate in the conflict in Israel and Gaza, including by negotiating a potential prisoner exchange” (Wall Street Journal, 2023). So too have repressive Gulf Arab regimes, eager to boost their status and have their human rights abuses overlooked. Their efforts have been largely self-serving, a means to boost their legitimacy and international prestige; they may well have valid interests, but they also have serious human rights issues. The process is not unlike ‘sportswashing’, for which the Gulf States are notorious. These diplomatic offices would be better served by neutral states working without a self-serving agenda. However, as discussed above, neutrals are increasingly rare in Europe, and now non-existent in the Nordics.

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