

## Book Review

# Whither dialogue? Nordic leadership and the collapse of Europe's two-track approach to Russia

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## Book Titles

Niinistö, S. (2025), *Kaikki tiet turvaan – Sinnikkään Suomen suunta* [All Roads to Security: The Course of a Resilient Finland]. WSOY.

Stoltenberg, J. (2025) *On My Watch: Leading NATO in a Time of War*. HarperCollins Publishers. .

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a watershed moment in European security. As four years have now passed since the act of aggression, scholarly and policy-oriented works addressing this consequential development have begun to accumulate. Among these, biographical accounts and memoirs by policymakers constitute an important strand of the emerging literature, offering first-hand perspectives on the road to war, its outbreak and evolution, and the responses formulated across the transatlantic space and beyond.

While Nordic authors have already contributed extensively to this literature, the present review concentrates on two works in particular. These offer contrasting perspectives on the war: one grounded in the experience of national political leadership, the other shaped by the demands of steering a multilateral defence alliance. Notably, the trajectories of these two leaders eventually intersected in the management of consequential security developments. Furthermore, both works trace how engagement-based approaches towards Russia ultimately collapsed as Moscow resorted to full-scale invasion in an effort to bring Ukraine back into its sphere of influence.

Sauli Niinistö, President of the Republic of Finland from 2012 to 2024, offers what is to date the most fine-grained policymaker account of Finland's path to NATO membership. His book is not solely a reflection on Finland's accession to the Alliance, but also a justificatory account of the foreign policy line he pursued and refined during his presidency. At the same time, the narrative is selective rather than comprehensive: it foregrounds key events and turning points, rather than providing an exhaustive overview of Finland's foreign policy during the period – a work that may be forthcoming on a later date.

The book – clearly oriented towards legacy-setting and narrative benchmarking – is structured around two main parts. The first examines Finland's 'roads to security', encompassing its relations with Sweden, the United States and Russia, as well as the domestic context of foreign-policy decision-making. The second part addresses the developments preceding and following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As the narrative progresses, its level of detail and intensity increases, particularly towards the end of the book.

In Finland, debates over Niinistö's legacy, an exceptionally popular leader during his time in office,

have centred on his purportedly overly engagement-driven approach to Russia. Critics have pointed to the resulting caution in deepening Finland's military ties with NATO and key allies such as the United States, as well as his reluctance to explicitly steer Finland towards NATO membership before the 2022 watershed. This restraint has commonly been interpreted as stemming from a desire to avoid provoking Russia and from sensitivity to long-standing public opposition to military alignment.

The book demonstrates, however, that Niinistö's strategic compass was consistently oriented towards the West, even if his circumspect approach to advancing defence cooperation – manifested, for example, in the micromanagement of Finland's participation in international military exercises – appears, in hindsight, excessive. According to Niinistö's own account, he began to seriously consider NATO membership months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This claim is credible on the basis of the evidence presented in the book, even if such deliberations were not apparent to most observers of Finnish foreign policy until the invasion itself fundamentally altered the strategic environment. Against the backdrop of current turbulence within the West, Niinistö's low-key, pragmatic, and moderate views on NATO membership appear measured and prudent, particularly when contrasted with the more hubristic tones that characterised parts of the Finnish NATO accession debate.

In sum, the book reinforces Niinistö's image as a risk-averse leader who genuinely believed in the value of dialogue among disagreeing actors. For Finland, the outcomes of dialogue were mixed. Considerable political capital and diplomatic effort were invested in sustaining engagement with Russia, with limited tangible returns as Russian revisionism intensified. At the same time, bilateral dialogue arguably contributed to stabilising the Finnish–Russian relationship and furnished Finland with credibility and diplomatic capital in its dealings with Western leaders, including President Joe Biden.

Jens Stoltenberg's memoir, in turn, traces his ascent to the position of NATO Secretary General and, in particular, how he steered the Alliance through his unusually long and eventful ten-year tenure. The book focuses on the Alliance's central challenges: managing Donald Trump's turbulent first term as US president, overseeing the dramatic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and coordinating NATO's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The narrative is heavily centred on high-level interactions among allied leaders. For readers interested in the Alliance's everyday functioning or its institutional intricacies, this emphasis may prove disappointing.

The most compelling sections of the book concern developments related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the behind-the-scenes accounts of Stoltenberg's and fellow allied leaders' interactions with Trump. By most accounts, Stoltenberg handled Trump skilfully, and recent scholarship has underscored his role in safeguarding NATO's cohesion and, arguably, its survival during Trump's first term (Schuette, 2021).

Like Niinistö, Stoltenberg – shaped by Norway's strategic culture of deterrence and reassurance vis-à-vis Russia (Cameron, 2024) – was a committed proponent of dialogue with Moscow. This conviction was reinforced by his close relationship with his father, the former Norwegian foreign minister Thorvald Stoltenberg. As Norwegian prime minister, Stoltenberg had experienced periods of constructive bilateral relations with Russia, and one of his ambitions as Secretary General was to transpose elements of that engagement to the NATO–Russia relationship. While Stoltenberg points to certain limited achievements – such as agreements on air-safety 'rules of the road' in the Baltic Sea, an initiative initially promoted by Niinistö when Finland was still only an Enhanced Opportunities Partner of NATO, and the revitalisation of the NATO–Russia Council – efforts to restore meaningful dialogue after 2014 ultimately failed.

Maintaining dialogue with Russia proved difficult for several reasons. First, Russia's approach to NATO was openly hostile, a reality Stoltenberg encountered already in his first meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who showed little interest in genuine dialogue. Second, Stoltenberg's dialogue-oriented

approach did not enjoy universal support among NATO allies. He recounts an illustrative anecdote from Lithuania, where he sought to persuade the Lithuanian Minister of National Defence, Juozas Olekas, of the feasibility of dialogue with Russia. The response was telling: “Jens, you have travelled in Russia to promote environmental projects. I, by contrast, was born in a gulag.” At the same time, a majority of allies remained highly cautious about provoking Russia in any way, a stance that constrained NATO’s ability to reintroduce robust collective defence measures following Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

Beyond their shared belief in dialogue, Niinistö and Stoltenberg are also linked by their roles in Finland’s (and Sweden’s) NATO accession process. Both books recount these developments from distinct vantage points. Stoltenberg – initially taken aback by the sudden membership applications – proved, in his role as Secretary General, indispensable in guiding Helsinki’s and Stockholm’s uncertain and partly rocky path to Alliance membership. In the acknowledgements of his book, Niinistö explicitly singles out Stoltenberg, expressing particular gratitude for his strong support.

Stoltenberg, in turn, devotes several pages to the Nordic membership processes, including the high-stakes meeting between representatives of Finland, Sweden and Turkey on the margins of NATO’s Madrid Summit in July 2022, remembering Niinistö’s clear frustration with Turkish obstructionism. While the meeting ultimately unlocked the ratification process among the Allies, Ankara repeatedly complicated the proceedings, delaying accession until Finland and Sweden joined the Alliance in 2023 and 2024 respectively.

## References

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