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KEEPING THE (NATO-)OPTIONS OPEN

Observations on Finnish Domestic Discussion
Surrounding the Issue of NATO Membership

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VORWORT

Eevi Laukkanen, BA, absolvierte in der Zeit vom 15. September bis 15. Dezember 2002 am Büro für Sicherheitspolitik des Bundesministeriums für Landesverteidigung ein Praktikum im Rahmen ihrer sicherheitspolitischen Ausbildung. Dieses Praktikum wurde durch das „Center for International Mobility“, Helsinki, vermittelt.

Ihre Aufgaben in dieser Position umfassten Rechercharbeiten zu wichtigen und aktuellen Themen der Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik sowie das Erstellen von Analysen und Studien zu sicherheitspolitischen Problembereichen, die in weiterer Folge eine Grundlage für die Beratungstätigkeit des Büros für Sicherheitspolitik bildeten.

Mit „Keeping the (NATO-)Options Open“ liegt nunmehr die umfangreichste Arbeit vor, die Frau Laukkanen im Rahmen dieses Praktikums verfasst hat. Sie ist im Wesentlichen eine Aufnahme der innerfinnischen Diskussion über die verschiedenen Aspekte einer möglichen NATO-Mitgliedschaft. Dabei wurde diese mögliche NATO-Mitgliedschaft insbesondere im Hinblick auf die aktuellen innerstaatlichen Tagesthemen, die sich aus der Mitgliedschaft ergebende Änderung der finnischen Sicherheitssituation, den möglichen Einfluss Finnlands bei künftigen NATO-Entscheidungen und das Post-Prag-Szenario untersucht. Eine Zusammenfassung der öffentlichen Meinung zu diesen Themen in Finnland und die daraus abzuleitenden Schlüsse für die finnische Sicherheitspolitik beschließen die Studie.

Das Büro für Sicherheitspolitik möchte sich hier auch für die ausgezeichnete Arbeit, die von Frau Laukkanen geleistet wurde, bedanken und wünscht ihr für ihre weitere Karriere alles Gute.

Mag. Andreas Wannemacher

1. Introduction

Finland's current overall security policy solution comprises a credible, independent defence, European Union (EU) membership and a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) option. 'Flexibility' could be the best word to describe Finnish security policy today. According to the latest Finnish national security report, Finland remains militarily non-aligned "under the prevailing conditions" and is "constantly re-assessing its military non-alignment and the functioning of crisis management and security co-operation in Europe, taking into consideration changes in the regional security environment and developments in the European Union".¹

Furthermore, the Finnish security and defence policy has been internationalised on the level of rhetoric as well as in practice over a short period of time. When studying the Finnish government's security reports, the Finnish defence discourse as a whole appears to have changed through a new emphasis on international military co-operation, which serves not only to pacify the international community but also to strengthen the Finnish military. "Multifaceted international military co-operation increases openness and trust between countries and improves the international community's capacity to prevent and resolve military conflicts", while "participation in international crisis management provides experience that can be of use in national defence and in maintaining readiness in crisis situations. The Finnish Defence Forces' international co-operation also reinforces the credibility of the country's national defence capability."² Finnish defence has therefore moved on from mere "credible national defence" to one that is said to be even more credible if internationalised.

In regard to NATO membership, Finland has so far been following a 'third way': neither joining nor opposing the membership but keeping 'all doors open'. While officially remaining non-aligned, it has in practice sought ever closer co-operation and achievement of interoperability with NATO up so that it could just 'stroll in' to the Alliance any time it chose to. The next White Paper on Finnish national security and defence policy is due to be published in 2004. It is widely believed that the central question of the document will indeed be the Finnish policy of military non-alignment and the possible changes to it.

¹ The Finnish Security and Defence Policy 2001, Report by the Government to Parliament on 13 June 2001.

² Ibid.

The following study concentrates on the central issues that have been raised in the Finnish public discussion surrounding possible NATO membership. The European Union and transatlantic relations are also touched upon briefly with regard to their relevance to Finnish security policy.

2. The European Union

It is worth noting in this context that for Finland seeking security was probably the main motivation for joining the EU, although the public discussion at the time concentrated on emphasising the less controversial economic benefits of the membership.³ One could therefore say that in deciding to join the EU, Finland also chose an alliance with the West. It certainly marked the end of its policy of neutrality. And since it had a security motivation for joining the Union, "Finland [naturally] supports a strengthening of the EU's effectiveness in the field of foreign and security policy".⁴ Finland has linked the EU very closely to its national security by arguing that its "membership in the EU raises the threshold to exert pressure against Finland. It also offers Finland means to resolve conflicts and increases the options available to receive assistance to repel threats".⁵ Consequently, improving the EU's security policy and its ability to take action is fundamental in securing Finland's national security objectives.

While assessing the recent Finnish security policy, it appears that Finland is simultaneously drawing a line and getting prepared to jump over it. 'Compatibility' has been the keyword in Finnish EU policies: compatibility between the Finnish policies of military non-alignment and the evolving European foreign, security and defence policy. The reasoning has been that there is a line between crisis management and common defence that no one intends to cross and that makes this kind of compatibility possible. Whereas strengthening the EU's crisis management was always seen as an important and desirable development, Finland has not been supportive of the move towards a common defence and has argued

³ In the words of president Mauno Koivisto: "The strongest reason for seeking EC membership seemed to me to lie in the realm of security policy. The economic reasons were secondary." in Mauno Koivisto: Witness to History. The Memoirs of Mauno Koivisto. President of Finland 1982-1994, (Hurst & Co: London 1997), pp. 246, 279.

⁴ The European Security Development and Finnish Defence, Report by the Council of State to Parliament, 17 March 1997, p. 21.

⁵ Finnish Security and Defence Policy 2001, Report by the Government to Parliament on 13 June 2001.

that it does not correspond to the needs of strengthening the ability of the Union to operate.⁶

However, in relation to the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) Finland may have caught itself in a so called "maximalist's trap".⁷ From early on Finland has been strongly supportive of the development of the EU's crisis management capabilities. Originally the emphasis on crisis management was thought to hold back the creation of European defence. Also, active involvement in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was seen as beneficial for Finland who needed to counteract suspicions about its possible reluctant attitude, as a non-aligned country, towards all security political co-operation. But having once defined itself as an active promoter of the EU's crisis management capacity, Finland has logically had to continue supporting its development. This has made Finland a 'maximalist' in the field, an active participant on all fronts, including the development of advanced military capabilities. The problem is that there is no ceiling to that development in sight: crisis management can cover all kinds of activities and in the end there is no clear division between crisis management and defence.

Although Finland still continues to promote the view that the EU should focus mostly on the civilian part of crisis management – as a manifestation of a wider concept of security – it appears at the moment that Finland would not even opt out from a development towards a supranational 'common market defence'. It has shown willingness to accept flexibility in foreign and security policy, as well as majority voting. At present Finnish legislation does not allow Finland to take part in crisis management operations without a United Nations (UN) mandate but it has been observed that the public debate in Finland seems to be paving the way for more EU autonomy in relation to the UN, thus relaxing the Finnish emphasis on the need for a UN mandate.⁸ A change in legislation might very well follow soon.

It is the development of the EU's defence dimension that is most likely to affect Finland's security policy in the future, including its policy towards NATO. If non-alignment turns out to be uncomfortable or irrelevant in the Union, the country

⁶ Tapani Vaahtoranta – Tuomas Frosberg: *Post-Neutral or Pre-Allied? Finnish and Swedish Policies on the EU and NATO as Security Organisations* (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2000), p. 23.

⁷ Hanna Ojanen: "Sweden and Finland: What difference does it make to be non-aligned?" in Graeger-Larsen-Ojanen: *The ESDP and the Nordic Countries* (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2002), p. 178.

⁸ Hanna Ojanen: *Theories at a loss? EU-NATO fusion and the low-politicisation of security and defence in European Integration* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2002), p. 17.

will need to reassess its non-alignment policy or its relationship with the Union. The main driving force behind Finnish policy with regard to ESDP is the dedication and willingness to be a constructive, co-operative and, in any case, not obstructive member. It wants to show that a militarily non-aligned country does not hinder development in security affairs, and it does not in principle exclude military alliances either. This '*Musterknabe*' strategy of Finland is based on the belief that if Finland cannot keep to the core of the Union, it will face serious risks, such as marginalisation.⁹

3. Transatlantic Relations

In regard to EU-United States (US) relations, Finland greatly values the presence of the US in Europe and in Northern Europe in particular. There are completely new elements related to this aspect in the latest Finnish security report, since the report states that "Finland seeks to act in a manner that ensures the retention of enduring links between Europe and the United States. [Finland] supports the preservation of strong transatlantic relations in matters concerning Euro-Atlantic security and the development of co-operation between the EU and the United States in questions concerning European and international security."¹⁰ In other words, Finland's position is that the EU should recognise the strong US presence and its benefits, and that any weakening of the transatlantic ties would not contribute positively to North European security. This has also been mentioned as one reason why Finland has been wary about developing the EU's common defence: it might decrease US presence in the region without being able to fill the gap this would leave in terms of military capabilities.

Consequently, a functioning relationship between the EU and NATO is also in the interest of Finland. The security report characterises NATO "as an important forum for maintaining US presence and US participation in Europe".¹¹ Furthermore, improving the EU's crisis management capacities through links with NATO is commendable. The report states that "Finland is committed to fully participating in the development of the European Union's crisis management capacity and in forging closer co-operation between the EU and NATO" and that "building up

⁹ Hanna Ojanen together with Gunilla Herolf & Rutger Lindahl: Non Alignment and European Security Policy. Ambiguity at Work (Finnish Institute of International Affairs & Institut für Europäische Politik: 2000), pp. 117–119, 127–128.

¹⁰ Finnish Security and Defence Policy 2001, Report by the Government to Parliament on 13 June 2001.

¹¹ Ibid.

the EU's capacity to operate in co-operation with NATO will strengthen both European crisis management and transatlantic security co-operation."¹²

The Finnish desire to keep both the US and the EU present in the North European region and to try to remain militarily non-aligned itself somewhat blurs its EU-NATO distinction. Hence a clear EU-NATO agreement on permanent arrangements for NATO's military support for the EU would clearly benefit Finland. It would guarantee the EU the resources, which it needs and could also reduce the undesirable implications of Finland being outside NATO – or even make NATO membership unnecessary.¹³ Institutionalisation of these inter-organisational relations would also be favoured by Finland, as permanent guidelines could decrease *ad hoc* arrangements between the EU and NATO, likely to be negotiated between the larger member states.

4. NATO

Finland's relations with NATO in the post-Cold War period have been based on the perception that direct involvement, not just in European, but also transatlantic security co-operation and increasing interoperability of armed forces, is a factor that strengthens Finnish security. In 1992 Finland was the first neutral country to become an observer in the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), created in 1991 with the aim of establishing relations between NATO and Central and Eastern European countries – former members of the Warsaw Pact now interested in NATO membership. From Finland's point of view NACC was considered useful as a forum for discussion and because of the information that could be gained through it.¹⁴ In 1997, as NACC was transformed into the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), Finland became a member right from the start. Also in 1997 the first Finnish Ambassador was accredited to NATO. In 1994 Finland joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme and in 1995 the PfP's Partnership and Review Process (PARP) (which was set up to develop the interoperability and performance of partner country forces, as PARP is similar to NATO's own defence planning system). NATO has also been introducing Partnership Goals for partner countries, the achievement of which is monitored

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hanna Ojanen: "Sweden and Finland: What difference does it make to be non-aligned?" in Graeger-Larsen-Ojanen: *The ESDP and the Nordic Countries* (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2002), p. 190.

¹⁴ Paul Luif: *On the Road to Brussels. The Political Dimension of Austria's, Finland's and Sweden's Accession to the European Union* (Austrian Institute for International Affairs, Laxenburg: 1995), p. 252.

through regular reporting. Finland has 68 Partnership Goals for the planning period 2002–2008. The Finnish forces equipped and trained for crisis management represent the most visible element of these goals. Some of the Partnership Goals also support the information gathering and development needs of Finland's national defence.¹⁵

Each year, Finland participates in about 400 PFP events, including seminars, courses and training exercises. NATO's development in emphasising crisis management among its sphere of activities has increased the PFP's importance for Finland. The improvement of multinational crisis management preparedness is a central goal for Finland, together with receiving information on NATO and the more general aim of improving the capabilities and reactive capacity of defence forces.¹⁶ Co-operation in the PFP programme has for instance enabled Finland's full participation in NATO-led operations in Bosnia (IFOR/SFOR) and Kosovo (KFOR). These operations have given Finnish troops a wide range of experience in co-operating with the armed forces of other countries. Such operations are also considered as very effective in developing the skills of troops and commanders for national defence tasks and as boosting the credibility of Finnish defence in the eyes of the rest of the world. For example Finland taking over the lead of a brigade from Great Britain in the Kosovo operation in 2003, as the first NATO partnership state, is considered as a significant vote of confidence in the country.¹⁷

Ojanen *et al.* recognise two guiding principles in the Finnish participation in NATO activities. First, Finland has underlined the principle that every country has the right to choose the modes of participation most suitable for itself. And second, it has, together with Sweden, sought to ensure an equal right of participation for non-aligned countries in NATO co-operation activities, planning and decision making within the EAPC/PFP framework. One of the problems with co-operation in NATO structures, from Finland's point of view as a non-aligned country, is that the partnership arrangements are predominantly directed to countries outside the European security community and are clearly aimed at creating basic preconditions for the eventual NATO membership of these coun-

¹⁵ Ministry of Defence: "Co-operation in NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme", online: <http://www.puolustusministerio.fi/index.phtml/page_id/196/topmenu_id/4/menu_id/196/this_topmenu/118/lang/3/fs/12> retrieved on 4 December 2002.

¹⁶ Hanna Ojanen together with Gunilla Herolf & Rutger Lindahl: Non Alignment and European Security Policy. Ambiguity at Work (Finnish Institute of International Affairs & Institut für Europäische Politik: 2000), p. 111.

¹⁷ "Kaskeala: NATO-päätöksessä ei syytä hötkyillä" in Helsingin Sanomat, 1 December 2002.

tries.¹⁸ On the one hand the NATO Partnership structures facilitate pragmatic co-operation without formal membership, but on the other hand they also help and aim towards membership. This naturally increases pressure on Finland's policy of military non-alignment.

4.1. Finland's Policy of 'NATO option'

Ever since the mid-1990s Finland has held a relatively fixed policy towards possible NATO membership, a policy, which can be called the 'NATO option', or the 'policy of open doors'. According to this policy, it is not feasible for Finland to apply for NATO membership "under the prevailing conditions".¹⁹ However, Finland is "constantly re-assessing its military non-alignment and the functioning of crisis management and security co-operation in Europe, taking into consideration changes in the regional security environment and developments in the European Union". In other words, membership of NATO remains a permanent option, an option that could be taken up in case the overall security conditions were to change. Exactly what kind of changes or developments would lead Finland to apply for NATO membership remains unclear – the security doctrines of the government certainly do not spell them out.

The logic behind the current policy has been that in this way Finland can get very close to NATO in practical terms, while avoiding the politically sensitive issue of formal membership. The two-track policy, designed to link the country as closely as possible to NATO while refraining from actual membership, is pursued in two fields: on the one hand, in terms of military interoperability and on the other hand on the political level.²⁰ The military interoperability has been developed mainly in four areas. Firstly, through NATO's partnership arrangements; secondly, through independent Finnish defence programmes such as the Readiness Brigades; thirdly, through weapons purchases, such as those of the F/A-18 Hornet; and fourthly through participation in NATO-led exercises and peace support operations, such as SFOR and KFOR. On the political level Finland has been drawn close to NATO via its EU membership and participation in the development of CFSP. As CFSP has deepened, the non-NATO members of the EU have

¹⁸ Hanna Ojanen together with Gunilla Herolf & Rutger Lindahl: *Non Alignment and European Security Policy. Ambiguity at Work* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs & Institut für Europäische Politik: 2000), p. 111.

¹⁹ *The Finnish Security and Defence Policy 2001*, Report by the Government to Parliament on 13 June 2001.

²⁰ Tomas Ries: *Finland and NATO* (National Defence College, Finland: November 1999).

automatically become involved in the European pillar of NATO and thereby indirectly but closely involved with NATO.

As in the Finnish NATO discussion in general, the question of Russia and its relations with NATO, EU and US have always been among the most important factors in the Finnish assessment of its policy towards NATO. One of the main reasons for Finland not to have joined NATO so far has been the interest to preserve stability and foster a positive development in Russia. NATO membership was seen as potentially jeopardising the co-operative relationship between Russia and the countries in Northern Europe. One argument in favour of the current NATO option policy has therefore been that it does not provoke Russia in any way, although it makes NATO membership quick and easy to achieve should it suddenly become necessary. Under the current circumstances Finland can co-operate with NATO as much as it likes and this extensive co-operation has indeed been seen as strengthening the credibility of the 'NATO option'. Since a high level of interoperability with NATO has already been achieved through the partnership activities, in times of crisis Finland could 'plug in' to the NATO structures fairly easily. The NATO option therefore works as a type of deterrent against any possible outside aggression.²¹

The weakness of this argument has been pointed out by both supporters and opponents of NATO membership. Some are of the opinion that it is exactly now that Finland should decide about its NATO membership, as there are no pressing threats to the country's national security in sight. For example the current weakness of Russia and its apparent willingness to co-operate with the West would restrain any major negative reaction from its direction. Postponing the NATO decision until a crisis of some kind occurs would raise the prospect of a confrontation with Russia, which at worst could lead to NATO refusing to take Finland in under its defence provisions – a problem in such a situation. Joining NATO first when its defence assistance would actually be needed does not only have its risks but is also contrary to the idea of 'responsibility' that is central to Finland's international security policy. Arguments in terms of moral commitment to sharing responsibility, showing solidarity and even preparedness to assist others by military means in return for their equivalent promise, have often been presented in relation to Finnish EU policies, but the view that "instead of free-riding at other's

²¹ Tuomas Forsberg: NATO-kirja (Ajatus Kirjat, Helsinki: 2002), p. 281.

expenses, one should bear one's responsibility"²² is present in discussions of Finnish NATO policy as well.

The development of NATO and its functions is naturally another important factor that will influence Finnish policy. One of the reasons for the ambiguity of the option-policy obviously is that NATO is considered as a type of moving target these days. The Finnish government has therefore justified its 'wait and see' policy by pointing out that since there is no current pressure on Finland to change its orientation – rising from any pressing threats to its national security – it is possible to "observe the development of the new NATO for a couple of years and take our time in making the decision", as the Chief of Defence Juhani Kaskeala recently commented.²³ However, later on in the same interview Kaskeala also said that "it is obvious that we will be facing a uniformity of EU and NATO memberships at some point. The EU's common defence cannot in my opinion become reality in any other way than by all member states sharing a membership both in the EU and NATO." This kind of commentary reveals the credibility problem of Finnish NATO option policy. The policy of keeping all options open and constantly re-assessing the situation loses a lot of its value, if it in fact appears that NATO-alignment is already considered as more or less inevitable. Indeed Prime Minister Lipponen is known to have criticised even members of his own cabinet who with their either too pro NATO or contra NATO comments have in his opinion weakened the credibility of the option-policy.

The government's failure or unwillingness to clearly define the conditions that would make Finland change its option-policy in one direction or another certainly does not improve the situation. The critics of the Finnish NATO line have expressed doubts whether the reasoning behind the option-policy is really even known among the decision makers, if the main argument that is repeated in support of Finland's non-alignment is simply that "it is not in Finland's interest to become a NATO member under the current circumstances". It has been questioned whether the present option policy is really a result of careful strategic calculations or merely a kind of non-controversial compromise on a politically very sensitive issue.

²² Hanna Ojanen: "Sweden and Finland: What difference does it make to be non-aligned?" in Graeger-Larsen-Ojanen: *The ESDP and the Nordic Countries* (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2002), p. 198.

²³ "Kaskeala: NATO-päätöksessä ei syytä hötkyillä" in *Helsingin Sanomat*, 1 December 2002.

4.2. Finnish Public Discussion Concerning NATO Membership

Overall, there has not been as much public political debate concerning NATO membership as one could probably expect. To a certain extent this reflects the old tendency in Finland to have respect for authority in foreign and security policy. A common view is that public opinion does not even have a major impact on foreign policy decision-making in Finland, since all the major foreign policy decisions in the past were made without much public debate. As a general tendency, one could see that both the urgency and the significance of the possible NATO membership has lately been downplayed in the Finnish political discussion. Prime Minister Lipponen has repeatedly calmed down the NATO discussion by reminding that the issue of membership is not currently topical. Among NATO-opponents this has led to accusations of secrecy, of avoiding open confrontation on this politically sensitive issue, and of trying to take Finland to NATO quietly 'through the back door' after the next national election in 2003. Statements such as that of Minister of Defence Jan-Erik Enestam on how "Finland is on the way to NATO and only an active decision against it can change that direction"²⁴ have added to the confusion. In the eyes of the general public the political leadership is trying to speak in favour of both military non-alignment and NATO membership at the same time.

In his 'NATO-book' Tuomas Forsberg divides the Finnish public discussion on NATO up until today into four different time periods or 'waves'.²⁵ The first wave, and the overall beginning of speculating about Finnish membership in NATO, dates back to the early 1990s. At that time NATO membership was approached as a mere theoretical question, raised in parallel to the end of the Cold War and the rapid changes it brought about in Finland's international environment. It was debated whether NATO membership would even be a realistic option.

The second wave came about towards the mid-1990s, as the possibility of NATO enlargement started to become evident. At the same time the apparent instability of the political development in Russia, including populist remarks made by Zhirinovski about Russia claiming back her historical borders, raised fears in Finland about the unpredictability of Russia's behaviour. In this context, the traditional defence dimension of NATO was being emphasised in the public discussion in Finland. Those speaking in favour of the membership argued that Finland should seek security guarantees in order to be prepared for the worst,

²⁴ Erkki Pennanen: "Sukkasillaan NATOa kohti" in Helsingin Sanomat, 29 September 2002.

²⁵ Tuomas Forsberg: NATO-kirja (Ajatus Kirjat, Helsinki: 2002), pp. 266–267.

and those guarantees were not going to be provided by the EU. It would make sense to hand in the NATO membership application 'on a sunny day' and not to wait until any crisis would escalate.

The third wave began as the NATO enlargement to Eastern Europe had become a fact. At the same time a shift took place in the Finnish NATO discussion from an emphasis on a threat assessment to a question of influence. The argument is that only through NATO could Finland gain any real influence, not just over matters of European security, but over other issues in the EU as well. It is argued that NATO membership would represent one central element in Finland's aspirations to remain in the 'core' of the EU. An influential position of Finland is seen to be dependant upon whether Finland would be an active participant in the security co-operation, because non-alignment can be seen as free-riding and that could weaken the credibility of Finland as an actor in the international community.

The fourth wave in the Finnish NATO discussion can be seen as beginning just now, when the second round of post-Cold War NATO enlargement has been decided upon. Also the assumption that NATO membership is going to be one of the central themes of the next government security White Paper, due to be published in 2004, has added to the overall discussion. Furthermore, the discussion will reflect upon the many new elements in world politics, such as war on terrorism, improved relations between NATO and Russia, as well as reforms taking place within NATO.

4.2.1. Current Themes in the Finnish Discussion Concerning the Issue of NATO Membership

NATO enquired after Finland's possible membership aspirations even before its first post-Cold War enlargement round. The President and Prime Minister were leading the discussion on the matter in the national security council. A report from military experts did not support membership.²⁶ The conclusion in the mid-1990s was that Finland could join NATO if the Alliance was going to transform itself into a crisis management organisation and if Russia would co-operate with NATO and generally take a positive stance towards it. Furthermore, Finland should refrain from applying for membership in the first wave of enlargement in order to avoid being associated with the former Warsaw-Pact countries of Eastern Europe, as this could lead to a deterioration in Finnish-Russian relations. The conditions at the time when these conclusions were made have since changed significantly, and if the decision were to be taken again now there would seem to

²⁶ Memoirs of Alpo Rusi, adviser to president Martti Ahtisaari, as interpreted in Tuomas Forsberg: NATO-kirja (Ajatus Kirjat, Helsinki: 2002), p. 260.

be very few reasons left to restrain Finland from opting for NATO membership. However, new conditions have raised new questions and hence the debate is far from over.

4.2.2. NATO Membership as a Question of Security

NATO membership as a question of security may have been a paramount theme back in the beginning of the 1990s but it continues to play a part in the current discussion as well. It is acknowledged that Finland would not be seeking NATO membership for reasons of security alone since it has a well-functioning defence system and it does not suffer from any 'security deficit'. Matters of military security as such would therefore not necessarily be the main motivation behind Finnish NATO membership but they are nevertheless matters that cannot be overlooked. The most straightforward argument for joining NATO is of course that it would provide Finland with security guarantees from an alliance in possession of technologically unparalleled military capabilities – in time of crisis Finland would be defended by the best available forces.²⁷ NATO membership, and hence the ability and likelihood of receiving outside military assistance, would therefore work as an incomparable deterrent. This would secure Finland's position especially in relation to Russia. Despite the current co-operative and non-threatening relations between Russia and the West layed on the historical experience Finland should remain prepared for any changes to the worse in that direction. If in the future Russia would for some reason cease to respect elements of co-operation and international norms and take a more aggressive approach towards the West, there is a good chance that Russia would still respect sheer military power and the collective defence provision that would cover Finland as a NATO member. It is argued that upholding a separation between Finland and the Western community by holding on to military non-alignment would not increase Finnish security in any way, but instead represents both a dangerous and an artificial separation. Already at present Finland is no longer alone nor neutral, but politically linked to the Western foreign and security policy through EU membership. As a result Finland risks finding itself in a security political grey zone, a "dangerous no-man's land"²⁸ due to being politically linked to the West but militarily separated.

In a recent study on Finland's current policy of NATO option and Russia,²⁹ it was concluded that the present policy of Finland – officially emphasising non-

²⁷ Gustav Hägglund: Suomen Puolustus, ed. Ulla Appelsin, (Ajatus kirjat, Helsinki: 2000), p. 153.

²⁸ Tomas Ries: Finland and NATO (National Defence College, Finland: November 1999).

²⁹ Christer Pursiainen and Sinikukka Saari: Et tu Brute! Suomen NATO-optio ja Venäjä (Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2002), p. 36.

alignment but co-operating intensively to reach interoperability with NATO – appears from Russia’s point of view as a conscious but covert preparation for NATO membership. In this case Finnish NATO option policy does not bring, as intended, stability to the strategic situation in Northern Europe but instead just raises speculation about the distance between Finland’s *de facto* and *de jure* membership in NATO. One could therefore argue that NATO membership is at this point recommendable, be it only in terms of clarifying the security status of Finland. Under current circumstances – as Russia is co-operating intensively with NATO itself and would therefore not necessarily be in any way provoked by a Finnish accession to NATO – taking that step could indeed increase the overall stability in Finland’s security environment.

Furthermore, it can also be argued that Finland should not only rely on EU membership for its security arrangements, not just in terms of its national security but also in terms of its international security responsibilities. An effective CFSP supported by a competent military organisation could still be years away. Now with another NATO enlargement in sight, and hence confirmation of future US military commitment in Europe and of the continued leading role of NATO in terms of European military security, the pressure towards a rapid further development of ESDP has diminished, as most big EU member states are also members of NATO. For the time being, the EU will not be in a position to assume full responsibility even for continental security and any notion of a European army is still premature. Considering therefore the weakness of alternative institutions and the likely demands of future instabilities, NATO remains the only international political and military organisation with an integrated military structure and absolute capabilities for any effective military action, whether collective defence or collective crisis management missions.³⁰ Being a NATO member would therefore not only make Finland better prepared against threats to its own security but would also improve its ability to meet its responsibilities in the field of common security and crisis management.

Security implications make popular arguments also among opponents of Finnish NATO membership. As already mentioned earlier, the most common argument has traditionally been how the Finnish accession to NATO would unnecessarily provoke Russia and damage the 'special relationship' Finland has with its Eastern neighbour. This argument has naturally lost its sharpest edge now in the light of Russia’s present warm relations with the West and its inten-

³⁰ Esko Antola: *Transatlantic Relations. A New Agenda* (Jean Monnet Centre University of Turku, Finland: 2002), p. 81.

sive co-operation with NATO, but this has in fact also raised a question about the necessity of NATO membership. If a fundamental change in the relations between Russia and 'the Western powers' is indeed taking place, as it would appear at the moment, that would certainly lower the threshold of membership but would also decrease the need of defence and hence the added value of a NATO membership.³¹ If there are no more threats and differences between members and non-members, the basic reason for NATO membership – the security guarantees – can certainly be questioned.

The transformation in NATO's sphere of activities could also be seen as decreasing the value of its membership. The more NATO moves away from emphasis on Article 5 (on collective defence measures) towards a political community with crisis management and conflict prevention as its main areas of interest, the less appealing it might be to Finland in terms of security guarantees. Northern Europe no longer represents a strategic 'hot spot' to the US, and hence to NATO, and therefore the willingness and ability of NATO countries to commit extensive resources to the defence of Finland can be held as unlikely. It has been acknowledged that in terms of Finland's geographic position and the related burdens and merits of a NATO strategy, Finland would actually not be strategically a very attractive new member.³² If in the long run there would still be no guarantees as far as the quality of NATO defence provisions are concerned – although at the same time costly contributions to NATO operations around the world would be expected – then Finland ought to continue relying on its national defence.

As for the assumption that NATO membership would improve Finland's capacity to fulfil its international security responsibilities in terms of crisis management and conflict prevention, Finland has traditionally been emphasising the civilian means and non-military aspects of crisis management. It is a country with a long history of participation in peace-keeping operations and in practice the emphasis on 'softer' means in crisis management duties have been pointed out for example in the manner in which Finnish troops perform crisis management duties as compared to NATO soldiers.³³ It is difficult to see how NATO membership would in any way enhance the profile of Finnish international security commit-

³¹ Kari Möttölä, "Finland and the European Union and NATO: Implications for Security and Defence" in Erich Reiter and Heinz Gärtner (eds.): *Small States and Alliances* (Physica-Verlag, Heidelberg/New York: 2001).

³² Esko Antola: *Transatlantic Relations. A New Agenda* (Jean Monnet Centre University of Turku, Finland: 2002), p. 49.

³³ Hanna Ojanen: "Sweden and Finland: What difference does it make to be non-aligned?" in Graeger-Larsen-Ojanen: *The ESDP and the Nordic Countries* (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2002), p. 170.

ments; it could, however, just lead to a stronger 'militarisation' of the Finnish approach to crisis management. Also, the potentially global scope of future NATO operations is hardly in the interest of Finland. It has been argued that having to commit itself to possible military operations in far away destinations will represent a 'resource drain' that would weaken Finland's national defence. Linked to the 'out of area' aspect of future NATO operations is also the 'war on terrorism'. Although Finland can in theory at least be a potential target of a terrorist attack already, the more prominent view still appears to be that becoming a member of NATO and a military ally of the US would increase that likelihood significantly. Remaining non-aligned and working by civilian means towards improvement in the political, social and economic reasons that cause the emergence of terrorist groups might protect Finland against terrorism better than membership of NATO. As a final point, it has also been suggested that as a non-aligned country Finland can continue to exercise a role of a 'bridge builder' between conflicting parties, which it has done in relation to international crises in the past. This would not necessarily be the case anymore if Finland was a NATO member.³⁴

4.2.3. NATO Membership as a Question of Influence

As the security aspect of Finland's NATO accession has been losing relevance, the question of influence has very much taken the position of a 'favourite' argument in support of NATO membership. The issue of influencing NATO's decision-making is currently seen as posing a significant problem for Finland. Although trying to uphold the image of not intending to join NATO, Finland finds it increasingly important to be able to influence NATO's behaviour. After all, the issues discussed and decided upon in NATO also touch the interests of the countries outside the Alliance. Issues such as NATO-Russia relations, missile defence, NATO enlargement and terrorism all affect Finland. One of the central arguments in favour of Finland's NATO membership therefore is that Finland has less influence on these issues as long as it stays outside the Alliance.³⁵ As a mere partner of NATO it can only contribute to NATO decision-shaping, not decision-making. As Finland is nevertheless forced to react to the decisions that have been taken within the exclusive circle of NATO members, the present state of affairs has been described as a 'classic case of taxation without representation'. It is worth noting that the same type of argument was very influential in the time preceding

³⁴ Kimmo Kiljunen: Suomen asema vahvempi liittoutumattomana in Helsingin Sanomat, 30 November 2002.

Finland's EU membership. Finland had joined the European Trade Agreement (ETA) in the beginning of 1994 but EU membership followed already a year later, to a great extent because sharing the same rights and duties with the EU members but without decision-making capabilities was considered as too problematic and inhibiting a position. In relation to NATO it has been implied that Finland is currently facing a 'security-ETA'³⁶, the partnership arrangements with NATO have not offered the chance to affect NATO decisions in the way Finland had been hoping for, but it nevertheless has to comply with many of the NATO policies.

The way NATO has transformed itself from a collective defence organisation into a collective security organisation with a far richer and wider agenda is emphasised in the 'influence-argumentation'. Not only is NATO an organisation with whom Finland already shares the same general values as well as specific security goals – improvement in the common ability to take part in crisis management, strengthening the democratic control of the armed forces and an increase in the transparency of national defence planning, that all contribute to stability and security of the Euro-Atlantic area³⁷ – but it is also a political community that shapes the relations between Europe and the US in particular. Even the security political relations between EU and the US are constructed not just through the EU institutions but to a great extent through NATO. In order to be able to have any influence on how the relationship between the two will be developing, Finland cannot afford to stay outside NATO. Furthermore, it has been suggested that NATO membership would be necessary also in relation to ESDP. As a channel for receiving information and influencing the issues that affect the establishment of ESDP NATO membership could be crucial. Especially as 11 of the 15 EU states are also members of NATO – and with the future enlargements of both EU and NATO the number of allied EU states will be growing dramatically – Finland's position can become awkward, as it will clearly find itself in a minority. This is very much in contrast with its general approach to the EU and its willingness to position itself in the 'hard core' of the Union.

The need to be able to influence the developing relations between NATO and Russia has also been pointed out. It is in the national interest of Finland to integrate Russia into Western institutions and NATO membership could certainly offer a special window of opportunity to co-operate with Russia, covering all

³⁵ Pauli Järvenpää: NATO and the Partners: What are the Partners missing? (Ministry of Defence: August 2002), p. 26.

³⁶ Olli Kivinen: "Turvallisuus-Eta uhkaa" in Helsingin Sanomat, 22 November 2001.

³⁷ Pauli Järvenpää: NATO and the Partners: What are the Partners missing? (Ministry of Defence: August 2002), p. 25–26.

major levels and issues of European security. By remaining outside the Alliance Finland risks finding itself on the 'wrong track' in regard to shaping the Russia-NATO relations and will therefore lose out on an important channel of influence in a field that has a major impact on Finland's security environment.³⁸ Especially now that co-operation within the framework of the new NATO-Russia Council is making significant progress, fears have been expressed that soon Russia could have closer relations with NATO than Finland has through its PfP arrangements.

Desire to remain in the core of decision making could indeed be the factor that leads Finland to opt for NATO membership. However, how much weight and influence Finland could in effect exert into the Alliance's decision making – that is widely recognised as being dominated by the US – is another issue which so far has not received as much attention in the public discussion on NATO membership as it probably should have. It is naive to think that by taking up NATO membership Finland would automatically find itself in a position to exert influence on NATO policies. It is obvious that for example in regard to actual NATO military operations, the US already considers NATO decision-making mechanisms as too complex and even frustrating. NATO's consensus principle implies that all Alliance members must be heard – at least in principle – no matter how small their actual military contribution would be. With the next NATO enlargement in sight, the situation is bound to get even more complicated and hence the US domination in NATO decision making is likely to increase. The US pressure to transform NATO into a pool of resources which could be used to build 'coalitions of the willing' implies that even inside NATO Finland might find that the more important decisions would still be very much made for it and that its main task even as a NATO member would still be that of accommodating itself to NATO policies on which it would have only marginal influence.

Karoliina Honkanen, who has studied the influence of small member states in NATO, has concluded with regard to Denmark and Norway that these countries have had some significant influence mainly on shaping their own membership conditions and in some cases also on framing NATO's political strategies. However, as far as NATO's military strategy and enlargements are concerned, the small member states have not managed to exert much influence on these issues.³⁹ Also the flow of information within NATO has often been found to be dissatisfactory. Especially smaller allies have often found themselves completely dependant

³⁸ Christer Pursiainen and Sinikukka Saari: *Et tu Brute! Suomen NATO-optio ja Venäjä* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2002), p. 46.

³⁹ Karoliina Honkanen: *Pienten maiden vaikutusvalta NATOssa. Norjan, Tanskan, Tsekin ja Unkarin kokemukset jäsenyydestä* (Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2001).

on the amount of information that the US have decided to provide them with and have the feeling that they have often been left in the dark.⁴⁰ Probably the only thing that Finland can therefore be sure of, as far as its influence in NATO is concerned, is that it would have to adopt the role of a very active member state and show plenty of initiative in terms of bringing new issues to the Alliance's agenda. This would no doubt be very challenging and resource-consuming but it would also be the only way Finland could at least hope to be able to shape NATO policies and hence its own security environment.

4.2.4. 'Post-Prague NATO'

In relation to the reforms of NATO decided upon in the Prague summit of 21–22 November 2002, the future enlargement of the Alliance specifically in regard to the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania has been the issue that has received most attention in Finnish public discussion. Until as recently as the year 2000 it was still perceived that Finland's (and Sweden's) membership in NATO would be a precondition for the Baltic States joining the Alliance.⁴¹ As the Baltic States' NATO membership then turned out to become reality far more quickly – and independently of Finland and Sweden – concerns were expressed about the implications this would have for the stability in Northern Europe and for relations with Russia. As Russia then made it clear that it would not stand in the way of NATO enlargement, the overall position of Finland shifted to cautious support for the Baltic States' aspirations and finally to stating that their NATO membership would not have any dramatic effect on Finland. The Minister of Defence Enestam has emphasised that the question of Sweden's NATO membership is more important to Finland than that of the Baltic States. However, while he considers it as extremely unlikely that Sweden would join NATO, the possibility of Finland joining NATO without Sweden would not be as impossible a scenario. After all Sweden, who is not a member of the European Monetary Union (EMU) is a neighbour of 'EMU-Finland'.

The possible implications of the Baltic States' NATO membership on Finland's NATO plans have been described as twofold. On the one hand it could reduce, or at least postpone, the Finnish desire to join the Alliance. Above all Finland wants to be regarded as a stable Nordic country and not in any way to be associated with the group of former Soviet satellites, who need NATO to fill their security

⁴⁰ Tuomas Forsberg: *NATO-kirja* (Ajatus Kirjat, Helsinki: 2002), p. 126–127.

⁴¹ Tapani Vaahtoranta – Tuomas Forsberg: *Post-Neutral or Pre-Allied? Finnish and Swedish Policies on the EU and NATO as Security Organisations* (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs: 2000), p. 32.

deficit and as a recognition of their independence. On the other hand, it can increase the pressure on Finland to seek actual NATO membership, as the parallel future enlargement of NATO and the EU will create a two-level organisational structure that will cover almost all of Europe and the PfP programme will clearly lose a lot of its relevance.⁴² If the Baltic States are not considered to be the desirable reference group in terms of defining the right timing for NATO membership, then it is questionable whether Finland wants to be associated with the former Soviet states of Middle Asia and Caucasus either. Countries like Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Armenia will, after NATO enlargement, represent the main group in the PfP programme, in addition to the four other non-aligned European states.

As for the other major reforms of NATO decided about in Prague, they have not been very widely covered in the Finnish public discussion so far. However, the uncertainty about the future direction of NATO contributes to both arguments, those in favour of NATO membership as well as to those against it. On the one hand it could be in the Finnish interest to be a NATO member in order to be involved in the decision making concerning the future shape of the Alliance. On the other hand, it could be a better option for Finland to remain a non-member until the full implications of the proposed reforms can be weighed.

4.3. Public Opinion

Intensive co-operation with NATO, including participation in NATO-led crisis management missions, has not evoked as much concern in Finland as the question of actual NATO membership. For example, the majority of Finns were supportive of Finland's participation in the KFOR peace-keeping operation under NATO command right from the start.⁴³ Although support for the EU as a military actor has been among Finns somewhat higher than support for NATO, the support for actual EU common defence in Finland is one of the very lowest among EU states.

Membership of NATO has traditionally been met with very little support among the Finnish general public, with further drops to follow every time either NATO or the US got involved in military action somewhere around the globe. This was the case for example during the Kosovo bombings and after the terrorist attacks in New York. In the autumn of 2001 only 16 % of Finns supported mem-

⁴² Hanna Ojanen: "Naapurit menossa NATOon" in *Ydin*, 1/2002.

⁴³ "NATOn iskujen oikeutus jakaa mielipiteet kahtia" in *Turun Sanomat*, 3 April 1999.

bership of NATO, whereas 79 % were opposed to it.⁴⁴ The latest figures from an opinion poll conducted in November 2002 show that the share of NATO supporters was now at 18 % and that of opponents at 62 %.⁴⁵

However, already back in 1997 the majority of Finns believed that the decision makers were preparing Finnish membership in NATO and that Finland would eventually join the Alliance.⁴⁶ Along similar lines, in 2001 53 % of Finns believed that due to the multifaceted co-operation with NATO, Finland was in practice opting for a membership and would hence be giving up the policy of military non-alignment. In November 2002 as many as 70 % of the respondents believed that Finland was on its way to apply for NATO membership.⁴⁷

In the autumn of 2001 Finns were also asked "What in your opinion would be the best option, if Finland decided to either enter a military alliance, or to seek yet closer military co-operation with foreign states?" The suggested options were, for example, a defence alliance with Sweden, membership in NATO without foreign troops or bases in Finland during times of peace and development of EU responsibilities to cover also a military alliance. Membership in NATO without foreign troops and bases in peacetime was then seen as the best option, with 45 % of the respondents choosing the NATO option.

The clear opposition towards NATO membership among the Finnish general public naturally represents a problem to those members of the Finnish 'political elite', who are promoting the Finnish accession to the alliance quite openly. It has been suggested that whereas the political elite is now emphasising the transformations that have taken place in the orientation and functions of NATO (mainly in terms of new concentration on crisis management), the general public is far more conservative in its views and looks more on what still remains of the 'old' NATO. It has also been suggested that the decision makers have only themselves to blame for at least part of the general public's strong opposition to NATO.⁴⁸ For many years it has been repeatedly declared as the official stance of Finland that under the current circumstances it is not in Finland's interest to join NATO. Furthermore, in relation to the present policy of 'NATO option' there is general vagueness and inability from the decision makers' side to spell out what exactly

⁴⁴ "Suomalaisten mielipiteitä sotilaallisesta liittoutumisesta/liittoutumattomuudesta" (National Defence Information Planning Commission: 2002).

⁴⁵ "Suomalaiset tiukasti NATO on liittymistä vastaan" in Helsingin Sanomat, 23 November 2002.

⁴⁶ "Enemmistö uskoo suomalaisten valmistautuvan NATO-jäsenyyteen" in Helsingin Sanomat, 6 March 1997.

⁴⁷ "Suomalaiset tiukasti NATOon liittymistä vastaan" in Helsingin Sanomat, 23 November 2002.

⁴⁸ Tapani Vaahtoranta's interview "Uusi aikakausi koittaa" in Iltalehti, 16 November 2002.

the conditions affecting Finland's present and future security orientation would actually be. As a result, the Finnish people now hold a deep-rooted perception that NATO membership altogether is not desirable.

It has been reported that 80 % of the Finns are of the opinion that a referendum should be held, if applying for NATO membership is going to become topical.⁴⁹ Since making NATO membership subject to a national referendum would probably, at least under current circumstances, lead to a rejection of membership, it has already been suggested that no referendum will even be necessary. As a reply to criticism expressed by the European Ombudsman Jacob Söderman concerning the lack of openness in the Finnish NATO discussion, the Minister of Defence Enestam recently wrote a newspaper article where he claims that "... the decision-making power concerning the national defence of Finland belongs to the authorities elected for this purpose: the Finnish President, Government and Parliament. The opinions expressed by the Ombudsman Söderman represent altogether a strong argument in favour of why this should be the case. Decisions concerning national security cannot be made by spreading unfounded fears, but by allowing the political leadership to do their work in peace."⁵⁰ In other words, Enestam's view is that the people of Finland are not capable of making a decision about their country's national security orientation. The idea of a national referendum on NATO membership has increasingly started to gain ground among Finnish politicians, although many agree with the government stance that it is not a highly relevant issue at the very moment.

The President is traditionally a strong figure of influence in terms of public opinion in the Finnish society. Enjoying a high level of popularity, President Tarja Halonen and the stance she will adopt towards NATO membership is therefore likely to play an important role in the shaping of public opinion. So far President Halonen has remained very reserved in her remarks on NATO, carefully making sure she does not come out either in favour or in opposition to Finnish membership. In contrast to the vague 'oracle speeches' of President Halonen, the former Presidents of Finland have taken part in the NATO debate with more enthusiasm. For example President Mauno Koivisto (1982–1994) is remembered for his hefty critique towards the Alliance during the Kosovo bombings. The latest presidential addition to the debate is the speech given by former President (1994–2000) Martti Ahtisaari in the immediate aftermath of the NATO Summit in Prague. Ahtisaari, who has already in the past been known for his favourable comments towards

⁴⁹ "Suomalaiset tiukasti NATOon liittymistä vastaan" in Helsingin Sanomat, 23 November 2002.

⁵⁰ Jan-Erik Enestam: "Jacob Söderman avoimuuden apostolina" in Salon Seudun Sanomat, 22 September 2002.

Finnish NATO membership, picked in his latest public speech on the most common arguments of the opponents of NATO membership, one by one, commenting that they no longer were valid and that Finland's position would not become in any way more secure by remaining outside NATO. He opined that Russia is no longer a threat to Finland and therefore the fear that Finnish membership in NATO would adversely affect relations with Russia is no longer a valid argument in the debate about NATO. As for the NATO opponents' argument that it would be better for Finland not to commit itself to global security efforts – such as the new 'out of area' operations of NATO envisioned in NATO's Prague declaration – but to remain outside such international confrontations, Ahtisaari finds this hard to understand. According to him Finland "cannot remain a bystander to global security policy. ... The question is also one of morality; that we should demonstrate solidarity and bear responsibility of our own in the common security".⁵¹

The response to Ahtisaari's speech from the top trio of Finnish politics followed an already very familiar pattern, which somehow also supports the speculations presented in the media that Prime Minister Lipponen would favour an accession to NATO, while Foreign Minister Tuomioja so far remains against it and President Halonen appears to be seeking her position between the two men.⁵² Accordingly, Lipponen described Ahtisaari's NATO favourable speech as an important contribution to the topic, but also pointed out once again that it was not yet time to draw any final conclusions about NATO membership.⁵³ Tuomioja was reported to have said that he does not agree with Ahtisaari's conclusion about the necessity of NATO membership.⁵⁴ As for Halonen, she remained very reserved in her comments, stating in relation to Ahtisaari's speech that "everyone has the right to their opinions and this was part of public discussion". She also evaded the question as to whether the government security report scheduled for the year 2004 would take a position on NATO accession by merely saying that in the report "all matters will be taken into consideration" and whether any position will be taken "is a matter of decision at the time. ... The situation both in NATO and the EU will

⁵¹ Martti Ahtisaari, "Maailman kansainvälisen politiikan tila ja Suomen turvallisuuspoliittiset valinnat", speech at the Security Policy seminar of Turun Sanomat and Pori Brigade, 25 November 2002.

⁵² "Halonen: Ahtisaari on vapaa puhumaan", Helsingin Sanomat, 27 November 2002.

⁵³ "Lipponen: Ahtisaaren NATO-puhe tärkeä puheenvuoro", Helsingin Sanomat, 27 November 2002.

⁵⁴ "Tuomioja torjuu Ahtisaaren johtopäätökset", Helsingin Sanomat (internet edition), 25 November 2002.

be looked at, as well as co-operation between the two, and then an opinion will be formed on how Finland could best play its part".⁵⁵

As a final remark, the next general election in Finland will be taking place in early 2003. The next government security political White Paper – and the one that is suspected to take a position towards NATO membership – is due in 2004. It has been suggested that the next time NATO will enlarge itself might be already in 2006. Another general election will be taking place again in 2007. The present government, and especially its social democrat Prime Minister Lipponen, has repeatedly downplayed the relevance of present speculations about Finnish NATO membership and has repeated that the issue is not topical at least before the new security White Paper. It has been suggested that the main motivation behind his comments is to try to prevent the issue of NATO membership becoming a significant election topic. The scenario which NATO critics in particular are now predicting is that by not making any official government line towards the highly controversial issue of NATO membership known before the 2003 election, the government parties try to secure an election victory. In the next security White Paper Finland will then assume a positive stance towards NATO membership and before the 2007 general election Finland could already be a NATO member. Since in principle the decision about joining the Alliance can be made without a referendum, the opinion of the Finnish population can in effect be ignored. Whether it will be possible to prevent NATO from becoming a major election topic is currently questionable. Interestingly enough, Foreign Minister Tuomioja – after having claimed earlier on several occasions that the NATO question will not become an election topic – came recently forward demanding that election candidates should make their positions towards NATO known. "In terms of credible democracy it is necessary that those parliamentary election candidates and parties who already have set Finland's NATO membership as their goal in the next parliament term have the courage to go public about it."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ "Halonen: Ahtisaari on vapaa puhumaan", Helsingin Sanomat, 27 November 2002.

⁵⁶ "Tuomioja haluaa ehdokkaiden NATO-kannat julki", Helsingin Sanomat, 10 December 2002.

5. Conclusion

Neither the reasons presented in favour nor the ones against Finnish NATO membership clearly prove one option better than the other. When there has not been any pressing urgency to take the decision, Finland's 'wait-and-see' policy has been a very natural choice. One also has to note that neither joining NATO nor remaining outside would necessarily represent a very dramatic change in the Finnish security policy. The difference between an actual NATO membership and Finland's current – already very internationalised – security policy based on working through the frameworks of the EU and NATO partnership arrangements could in practice be very small. But again, the relative insignificance of both options – Finland joining NATO or staying outside – naturally also gives cause to the arguments of both sides: those in favour as well as those against. Furthermore, it is often difficult to detect any of this sense of 'insignificance' when following the Finnish public discussion around the topic – the issue remains controversial and continues to raise strong emotions.

In any case, Finland cannot continue its 'wait-and-see' policy forever but will have to take an active decision on the matter sooner rather than later. As far as an attempt to make any predictions about Finland's future course of action is concerned, one can detect certain similarities between the present situation and the time preceding EU membership. Similar arguments are put forward in favour of NATO membership as were done in the discussion leading to EU membership. Also the way the political leadership appears as far more prepared for a NATO accession and the general public remains more conservative and cautious follows an already familiar pattern. Finland's accession to the EU was in the end a relatively swift process. It remains to be seen whether this will turn out to be the case with NATO membership as well.