

Ålands Demilitarisation – self-evident or threatened?

What effects does European security cooperation have on Åland's demilitarisation? The Åland Islands Peace Institute's invited the public to discuss this question at the seminar "Åland's demilitarisation – self-evident or threatened?" where both the threats and opportunities of enhanced security cooperation were discussed.

Around 35 persons came together at the Handelshögskola in Mariehamn to participate in the seminar on Monday evening, March 30th – Åland's Demilitarisation Day. Among the issues discussed were Thorvald Stoltenberg's recent report on enhanced Nordic security cooperation, the European security cooperation, enhanced by the Treaty of Lisbon, Finland's partnership for peace with NATO and a possible future Finnish Nato membership.

Guest speaker Professor emeritus Bo Huldt from Stockholm's Defense University talked about the security implications of the multi-polar system we are living in today, which forces single states to see security as an issue with a global perspective. According to Huldt, military strong and formerly neutral Sweden "has crawled out of its neutrality hole".

Colonel Erik Erroll from the Defense University in Helsinki talked about Sweden's defense committee's 2007 declaration of solidarity which declares that Sweden will not remain passive should another Nordic or EU state fall victim to a catastrophe or an attack and that Sweden expects a reciprocal commitment of all Nordic and EU states. Similarly to the commitments made by the Nato member states, the Lisbon Treaty includes a solidarity clause stating that shall one EU member state be hit by an attack the other member states will be expected to assist.

Professor emeritus Bo Huldt stated that even if the Nordic countries have made a transition between a violent history to peaceful coexistence, individual strategic perspectives subsist due to the different geographical positions. Sweden for example directs its attention more towards the controversial NordStream gas pipeline to be built through the Baltic Sea and its possible military defense by Russia, than towards cooperation in the Arctic. Huldt expects that a common EU framework will however, synchronize perspectives. In that regard one could see Nordic security cooperation as complementary to and a part of European security cooperation. However, Huldt expects Nato to remain the main military alliance whereas European security cooperation, including Nordic cooperation, will concentrate on civilian capacities.

Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark, associate professor in international law and director of the Åland Islands Peace Institute commented in the plenary debate that, irrespective of which cooperation will acquire relevance, regard has to be paid to the Åland Convention on the demilitarisation and neutralisation of the Åland Islands .

Member of the Ålandic parliament Harry Jansson presented several point he has identified as threats to and opportunities of Åland's demilitarisation and neutralization. Among these threats are that Åland itself will take on a too passive position, that Åland will be outplayed by other actors and that the demilitarisation and neutralisation will be exposed to pressure. Among the opportunities Jansson listed the possibility that the Åland Convention will be confirmed and paid due regard to by Nato and the EU and that the Åland protocol to Finland's EU accession treaty will be strengthened, explicitly including Åland's demilitarisation and neutralisation.

How should Åland seize these opportunities and avoid the threats? Members of Parliament Harry Jansson and Roger Jansson, both members of the committee on self-government, stressed the importance of the demilitarisation and neutralisation of Åland in the context of security cooperation. Both pointed to Finland's security- and defense-policy report, which did not mention Åland's status in 2004 and only in vague terms in 2009. According to the report Åland has an accepted position as a demilitarised zone which however, does not represent any obstacle for Finland's security cooperation. Jansson and Jansson agreed that the effects of enhanced security cooperation on Åland's demilitarisation around the Baltic Sea and beyond need to be discussed in more detail and that the discussion has to be brought into the diplomatic contexts. A first concrete step to make Åland's demilitarisation more visible could be the indication of the demilitarized zone on all marine charts.

Colonel Erik Erroll moreover, informed the audience about the current shifts in the area of conflict management, which have changed the current situation from the time when Åland's demilitarisation was enacted. The three main security perspectives today are democratization, disarmament and reintegration. Although the Finnish defense forces do not actively draw attention to the Åland example, Åland's demilitarisation is not considered as obsolete either. Erroll proposed that Åland should further promote its status as a demilitarised, neutralised and autonomous region and become a centre for international conflict management.

According to Erroll, another modernization processes currently on its way in Finland is the extension of conflict management capacities to parallel civilian and military instruments. Roger Jansson and Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark pointed out that a combination of civil and military capacities entails dangers for Åland's demilitarisation, for example when the military acts in civilian crisis or when it can no longer be clearly defined what constitutes a military activity.

Susann Simolin, information Officer

Translation: Sarah Stephan, Research assistant

The Åland Islands Peace Institute