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Finland's Strategic Pivot: A Geopolitical Revolution?

Europe

Europe and International





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Finland's conservative former Prime Minister Alexander Stubb won the nation's presidential election on February 11, with 51.6% of the vote, marking a significant political milestone for the Nordic country. This victory comes two years after Russian troops first stormed into Ukraine and almost a year after Finland joined NATO, prompting speculation about Helsinki's shift from enforced neutrality to rapid "NATO-ization".

Finland's politics under the shadow of the Ukraine war

Finland's February 11 presidential campaign was greatly influenced by geopolitical issues, reflecting the significant international prerogatives vested in the nation's highest office. The runoff election was a showdown between **two seasoned and acclaimed ex-foreign ministers**: conservative **Alexander Stubb** from the Kokoomus party and independent **Pekka Haavisto** from the green left. Stubb, a staunch advocate for NATO, secured a victory that solidifies the transatlantic shift of a small nation (5.5 million citizens) historically tethered (and compelled) to neutrality since its World War II defeat by the USSR.

The presidential contests on January 28 and February 11 mark the climax in a politically vibrant and conspicuous period for a country traditionally known for its political stability, consensus-driven politics, and low-profile approach to European affairs. In the span of a few months, Finland's political identity experienced a profound transformation. On May 18, 2022, mere days after Russia launched its incursion into Ukraine, Finland decided to abandon its long-held neutrality to apply for NATO membership. Less than a year later, on April 4, 2023, Finland joined the ranks of NATO as the defense alliance's 31st member, just as the country was electing a new majority in Parliament. Despite being at the end of his constitutionally mandated tenure, the outgoing (and very popular) president Sauli Niinistö played a crucial role in building a national consensus towards NATO integration as early as 2022. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg endorsed the move, stating that: "Joining NATO is good for Finland, it is good for Nordic security, and it is good for NATO as a whole". The long-standing principle of neutrality was officially abandoned by the country's top leadership.

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As a new presidential term begins, how can we assess Finland's departure from its historical neutrality? Has joining NATO radically altered the country's strategic orientation and the very political culture of the Finnish people?

Finland's defense policy in the NATO era: a rapid and decisive transatlantic reorientation

Finland's NATO membership was a major development, acknowledged by its new NATO allies as a significant change for the country. Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg stated that: *"Finland is safer and NATO is stronger with Finland as an Ally. Your forces are substantial and highly capable, your resilience is second to none and for many years troops from Finland and NATO countries have worked side-by-side as partners. From today, we stand together as Allies."* Stoltenberg underscored Finland's substantial contribution to the collective resistance against Russia, with which it shares more than 1,300 km of land borders in often sparsely populated regions. He also acknowledged the historical strength and competence of the Finnish military, dating back to the Winter War against the Soviet Union.

Some observers might view Finland's candidacy for NATO membership as predictable and dismiss its "NATO-ization" as mere political theater. Indeed, Finland had already been engaging with NATO through the Partnership for Peace since 1994, gradually breaking away from the neutral stance adopted under President Urho Kekkonen during the Cold War in order to coexist with the Soviet bloc without slipping into a communist regime. As Helsinki moved away from its "Finlandization", the country began to actively participate in NATO-led missions, including those in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In the 1990s, Finland increased military cooperation with NATO through participation in numerous regional exercises, such as BALTOPS (Baltic Operations). By joining the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in 2017, the country deepened its commitment as a strategic Nordic outpost to counter Russian threats. Finland was also actively participating in broader European security and defense initiatives.

Yet, the country's NATO candidacy represented a major qualitative leap. Until 2021, the Finnish public's initial preference, reflected in poll after poll, was to maintain neutrality while still engaging with NATO. The Ukrainian conflict had a significant impact on Helsinki. For many observers, the Russian aggression highlighted the vulnerability of states like Georgia, Moldova, and Finland, which were not protected by NATO's mutual defense umbrella under Article 5 of the Treaty. Finland's traditional reliance on a strong conscript army and neutrality was suddenly seen as insufficient in the modern security context, leading to a reevaluation of the country's defense posture among the Finnish population.

The path to join NATO, hindered by Turkish demands, marked a pivotal change in how the country approached its defense strategy. Defense spending was raised considerably in relation to Finland's GDP (\$275 billion in 2023). Its trajectory, as outlined by SIPRI, is impressive: Finland's defense budget grew from \$3.87 billion in 2021 to \$6.3 billion in 2023 and \$6.6 billion in the 2024 budget.

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Finland's defense spending budget not only nearly doubled in absolute terms, but it also surpassed the 2% of GDP target (political and voluntary) set by NATO. For 2024, on top of these defense ministry appropriations, Finland is investing \$400 million for the construction of a border fence with Russia in Karelia, a budget that falls under the ministry responsible for border protection. Finland is intent on modernizing its military forces, which rely on a large conscript and reserve force of 290,000 men and women, primarily deployed in the east and north of the country near the Russian border.

Finland's move towards closer integration with NATO is most visible in its efforts to acquire advanced defense equipment and technology. Indeed, Finland has been proactive in upgrading its military hardware even before submitting its NATO candidacy. The country acquired advanced fighter jets in 2021 (65 F35 jets for \$9 billion) as well as missile systems in 2022 from US manufacturers (rocket launchers, AIM 9X Block II air-to-air missiles, and AGM-154 air-to-surface missiles). While Finnish defense companies like PATRIA are part of these procurement processes, there's a noticeable increase in acquisitions, with a significant focus on American defense technology.

Finland has also made significant strides in ensuring its military forces and equipment can operate seamlessly with NATO forces. Since submitting its NATO application, Finland's active involvement in NATO exercises has increased. Finnish armed forces took part in 89 maneuvers in 2023 and plan for 103 joint exercises within NATO in 2024. Finland's military leadership has even been integrated into NATO's command structures ahead of formal membership, similar to Sweden. Overall, Finland's integration into NATO, in terms of military capabilities, command structures, and strategic resources, is proceeding quickly and efficiently.

A rapid but consensual internal political evolution

The "NATO-ization" of Finland unfolded at a very brisk pace between 2022 and 2023. Despite the rapid changes, Finland's political culture remained stable, with no significant conflicts or opposition. Key political figures like President Niinistö, Social Democratic Prime Minister Sanna Marin, and ex-Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto were able to unite the country around the issue of NATO membership, achieving an unexpected level of agreement. **The shift from a longstanding policy of neutrality, which was a core part of Finland's DNA, to NATO membership represents a significant and noteworthy change in the country's political and regional stance.**

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The invasion of Ukraine served as a catalyst for Finland to adopt a more assertive and clear stance against Russia. Sanna Marin promptly persuaded the Finnish Parliament to authorize direct arms shipments to Ukraine and emerged as one of the most fervent advocates for sanctions against Russia alongside her Baltic counterpart in Estonia, Kaja Kallas.

Contrary to what might have been expected given its history of neutrality, Finland took a leading role in supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression. Ironically, the broad consensus that she built on this external matter may have diverted attention from domestic issues, impacting Marin's performance in the April 2023 parliamentary elections. **Just as Finland's NATO membership was cemented, the electoral campaign focused on domestic issues and internal challenges, including public debt reduction, international borrowing for investments, climate change, and education reform.** NATO membership, once uncertain in 2021, had quickly become a foundational element of Finland's national policy by 2023. The election results indicated a shift in political priorities among the Finnish electorate, with significant support for the conservative and nationalist parties (receiving 20.8% and 20.1% of the vote, respectively), possibly due to the emphasis on domestic issues. The relatively disappointing performance of the Social Democratic party, with just over 19% of the vote, was perceived less as a referendum on Marin's foreign policy decisions and more as a critique of her domestic fiscal policies. In other words, Marin's electoral defeat was not negatively impacted by her stance on NATO.

In contrast to the 2023 legislative campaign which was highly national in focus, the presidential election involved significant discussions on foreign policy and strategic issues, without, however, challenging the consensus on NATO membership. Indeed, the Finnish presidency has significant responsibilities in foreign affairs and international relations. The President's roles include military leadership, representing Finland in international matters outside the EU, and collaborating with key government officials (including the Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Minister of Foreign Affairs) in foreign policy decisions. Despite the constitutional reform of 1999 aimed at possibly reducing the President's powers, the international aspect of the role remained significant. The changes transferred some powers from the President to the Prime Minister but the President's strong international role continued as a Finnish tradition. Finnish Presidents have historically played significant roles on the international stage, such as career diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, who played a significant role in international diplomacy, particularly in the Balkans conflict.

Campaign themes also focused on international issues. Without challenging NATO membership, **candidates debated Alexander Stubb's proposal to ban dual Russian-Finnish citizenship, the militarization of the Åland Islands, the potential deployment of nuclear weapons on national territory, and the fight against illegal migration, often facilitated by Russian authorities to pressure Finland, as seen last August.**

Candidates for the presidency leveraged their experience in international affairs as key qualifications for office. For instance, geopolitician Mika Aaltola became known for his media commentary on Ukraine, while Olli Rehn, a former European Commissioner and candidate from the Centre Party, focused his campaign on his qualifications in international matters. Both candidates emphasized their accomplishments and experience in international relations as part of their campaign. Alexander Stubb's victory is that of a liberal-conservative from the Swedish-speaking minority, but above all, that of a seasoned international actor with experience at major European institutions like the European Investment Bank and the European University Institute in Florence. **Unlike in France, where the institution of the presidency has defined powers, in Finland, it is the specific areas of responsibility, particularly in international affairs, that shape the role and influence of the presidency.**

Stubb's election marks a new phase in Finnish politics, reflecting changes brought about by NATO membership, yet maintaining a broad national agreement on key issues. **Despite significant shifts in Finland's political and regional stance, especially regarding international relations and NATO, these changes have occurred within a context of widespread and robust agreement among the Finnish population and political spectrum.**

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Geopolitical Hurdles Facing Finland's Upcoming Presidency

Looking ahead to 2024 and Alexander Stubb's term, several challenges loom.

The most pressing internal challenge is Finland's effective integration into NATO's military command. In particular, Finland must prove its military competence and reliability during the large-scale Nordic Response 2024 military exercises scheduled for March 3 to March 14 under Norwegian leadership. **Finland's defense capabilities will be closely scrutinized by both potential adversaries like Russia and NATO allies.** Finland also faces the short-term challenge of incorporating new defense technologies and systems into its military forces. Additionally, a significant task for 2024 is the development of an updated national defense strategy, outlined in a new "white paper". The document must reflect how Finland's defense strategies and concepts have adapted to meet the standards and requirements of NATO membership. Far from being a mere update, the white paper will have to comprehensively address Finland's integration into NATO and define Europe's role in Finland's national defense strategy.

Finland must also prepare for a potential escalation and redirection of Russian geopolitical pressures. Indeed, as **highlighted by the Russian president in his press conference on December 17, 2023, Finland's NATO membership, which creates a lengthy border (over 1,300 km) between NATO territories and Russia, significantly alters the strategic calculus in Northern Europe.** In response to the new geopolitical reality, Russian military authorities have taken several measures including the establishment of a new military region in the northwest, strengthening the Petrozavodsk military base near the Finnish border, and orchestrating a migration crisis in August. Given the limited movement on the Ukrainian front, Russia may shift its focus and apply more pressure in the Arctic and Baltic regions. Should the Ukrainian front remain stagnant in 2024, it is plausible that Russia's next moves will target the north, in Finland's immediate sphere of interest.

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