Commentary
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The End of Non-Alignment in Europe?

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Summary

Finland and Sweden have made political decisions to apply for NATO membership. While Turkey has expressed opposition to the idea and, therefore, the accession process will now face some unexpected difficulties, both Helsinki and Stockholm are most likely to succeed with their applications. As a result, their decades-long (200-year-long in the Swedish case) policies of non-alignment will become history.

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Comment

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Irrespective of how smoothly and fast the new round of NATO enlargement goes the Finnish and Swedish decisions reflect the already extreme military-political polarisation in Europe and indicate that tensions are likely to grow further. Under such structural conditions, as has always been the case historically, confrontation tends to spread and exert pressures on multiple states, including those not directly involved, to “take a side”. Clearly, this trend is once again unfolding in front of our eyes.

Beyond Europe

Interestingly, outside of Europe the ultimate effects might be the opposite. There the idea of non-alignment appears likely to gain new traction as numerous Asian and African countries see it against their own interests to side with any pole of the current geopolitical confrontation. Hence, they are actively resisting calls to join the West in sanctioning and isolating Russia. The more the war’s repercussions take their toll on the

humanitarian, socio-economic and, consequently, political developments in those countries the more emboldened voices in favour of the neutralist cause will sound. Insistent Western demands that no one should "sit on the fence" can even revitalise the Non-Aligned Movement or incentivise neutralist states in Asia and Africa to look for a new analogous project.

Yet, the longer-term strategic rivalry between the US and China, which will inevitably have the Asia-Pacific as its main geographical theatre, will introduce additional variables to the foreign policy thinking of the region's smaller nations. Some of them might indeed acquire new reasons to take a side instead of clinging to a middle ground. Nonetheless, the neutralist and, more broadly, hedging agenda will still remain highly relevant for such Asian states that are stuck in-between existing and incipient geopolitical incompatibilities.

Across Europe

In Europe, on the contrary, neutralist ideas and non-aligned policies are having a low time, especially after Finland and Sweden decided to seek NATO membership. Historically speaking, this looks somewhat counterintuitive, as these policies have served the security of many European nations well throughout centuries and at times enabled "islands of cooperation" where confrontation would otherwise have erected omnipresent "iron curtains".

> It is worth emphasising here that Helsinki and Stockholm are dropping the policies that have never failed them.

However, the dominant moods about non-alignment/neutralism in Europe, as well as discourses that shape them, are hardly surprising. Arguably, at least three factors explain them.

Firstly, populations and elites across Europe have got used to the idea that major wars on the continent are relics of the past. The fascinating accomplishments of the European integration and the unprecedentedly benign security atmosphere in the West under the "unipolar moment" made the end-of-history philosophy Europe's default mental compass. This, in turn, has naturally given birth to a new strategic culture that is rather maximalist and not focused any longer on basic security needs. As a result, the war in Ukraine is seen across Europe as the last attempt by a revanchist power to reverse the natural flow of human history and, thus, as a decisive battle between the good and the evil.

> Such a mental compass and the interpretation of the war's causes and meaning it produces leaves no space for neutralism. On the contrary, it carries a moral imperative to fight the perceived evil.

Secondly, modern warfare, which relies increasingly on hybrid and non-kinetic components, poses a serious question as to the relevance of the non-alignment concept today. While this question is equally applicable in the Asian or African contexts, in Europe it is emphatic. European non-aligned states' membership of or association with the EU – the self-defined normative power – has made classical neutrality outdated and now also blurs the boundaries and norms of non-aligned behaviour. For instance, militarily non-aligned European states that have joined the EU's sanctions against Russia are officially defined by the latter as "hostile nations".

> Consequently, the idea of non-alignment looks less trustworthy in the eyes of external powers that hypothetically could threaten the security of Europe's remaining non-aligned countries. And for that very reason, the policy is seen less reliable by the populations of those countries.

Thirdly, both factors above get further complicated by the phenomenon of social media in politics. No longer is it easy in Europe to declare, like former Austrian Chancellor Julius Raab did in the mid-1950s, that "neutrality commits the state, but not the individual". Today a state's commitment to non-alignment can hardly be sustainable, and thus credible, if society at large is not committed to the policy.

Non-aligned strongholds?

In spite of the decisions adopted by Finland and Sweden, the other few European non-aligned and neutral states – including Switzerland, Austria, Ireland, Malta, Cyprus, and Moldova – remain determined (at least, for now) to stay on course. It is symbolic that as Austria has just celebrated the 67th anniversary of the State Treaty, which introduced its perpetual neutrality, 75% of the Austrians still think that non-alignment works best for the security and development of their country. This is a mirror situation compared to Finland, where the now 76% of public support for joining NATO is clearly the key driver behind the Finnish government's historic decision.

However, the authorities in some countries are having difficult times trying to explain to their own societies what exactly their non-alignment means and why "we're not politically neutral, but we're military neutral", as the Irish prime minister put it.

> Moreover, new dramatic developments in and around Ukraine, which are inevitable as the war continues, can put more difficult questions about non-alignment in Europe.

It might then become no longer feasible politically to argue, like Bruno Kreisky did in his 1959 *Foreign Affairs* article, that a big-power conflict can still leave "room for small states to manoeuvre and advance their own concepts of international policy". In that case, it will no longer be hard to imagine pathways leading to changes in public attitudes.

Neutralism and non-alignment need legitimacy and space in Europe

For the ideas of neutralism and non-alignment to continue to serve Europe's security and wellbeing in a longer term, they need to survive the current low time. It is therefore important that:

- The very concepts of neutrality/neutralism/non-alignment remain politically legitimate across Europe and also generally acceptable for key non-European geopolitical protagonists;
- The remaining few non-aligned countries in Europe stay on course and preserve as many elements of neutralist policies as possible;
- Political and operational space be kept in European security for all sorts of *ad hoc* and project-based manifestations of neutralism.

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