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Åland Islands' Significance to Security in the Baltic Sea Region

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Regardless of recent reports of the possible re-militarisation of the Åland Islands, Finland will strengthen its ability to defend them, upholding the international agreements defining their special status. The key to the security of the archipelago will be military cooperation between Finland and Sweden. However, to enhance the credibility of deterrence of Russia in the region, including nuclear, more frequent exercises involving NATO countries, especially the U.S. and UK, will be required.

Finnish Defence Minister Jussi Niinistö has warned that defence of the Åland Islands is difficult because they are demilitarised. In his opinion, the islands are easy targets for surprise attack, such as that demonstrated by Russia in Crimea. The minister's statements were met with criticism from the government's opposition and representatives of the autonomous region of Åland, who interpreted them as the first step towards the withdrawal of Finland from international agreements defining the islands' special status. Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and Foreign Affairs Minister Timo Soini offered reassurance, however, that the government is not discussing such plans and will respect the agreements.

However, Russia's aggressive policy in the Baltic Sea region has led a number of Finnish politicians, experts and military commanders to support strengthening defence of the islands. In recent years, Russia has enhanced its offensive potential in its Western Military District, not only in the Kaliningrad region but also near Finnish borders (including new landing ships for the Baltic Fleet, helicopters and special forces). The potential risks for Finland may be seen in the scenarios of some of the Russian exercises. For example, in March 2015, Russia held manoeuvres with the participation of 30,000 soldiers, who simulated offensive operations against the Swedish island of Gotland, the Danish island of Bornholm, and the Finnish Åland Islands. The Finnish authorities emphasise that Russian media has launched a propaganda campaign aimed at Finland and disputing, among other things, its independence.

Strategic Importance. The Åland Islands comprise an archipelago of over 6,500 islands and islets situated in the Baltic Sea between Finland and Sweden at the entrance to the Gulf of Bothnia. Due to their location, they have historically been crucial to the security of both countries. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the enlargement of the EU and NATO, the importance of the islands in the strategic calculations of Russia significantly increased. Russia considers the Baltic Sea region to be one of its operational areas, where regional superiority over NATO gives it the ability to carry out offensive operations by surprise. Russia may see it in its interest to take control of the islands and, by opening another territorial conflict in Europe, seek to block Finland and Sweden from entering the Alliance or other goals. Russian control over the islands could hinder defence of Finland and Sweden and limit the ability of the latter to support the former militarily. It could also help Russia block airspace and sea routes important to NATO collective defence missions in the Baltic Sea region. At the same time, by undermining the territorial integrity of Finland, Russia could try to discourage NATO from escalation and compel the major NATO countries to start negotiations on a new security architecture in Europe.

Possible Change of Status. Finland is obliged under four international agreements to ensure the islands are demilitarised during peacetime (no deployment of troops or weapons) and that they remain a neutralised zone during wartime (prohibition on military operations). One bilateral agreement from 1940 is binding only in relation to Russia while two others (dated 1856 and 1921) bind Finland along with other European countries, mostly members of NATO,

including Poland. The parties to the fourth one, the peace treaty of 1947, are Finland, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Czech Republic, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and several non-European countries.

None of the four agreements offers the possibility of suspension or withdrawal. According to the norms of customary international law, one of these two options is acceptable only if agreed to by all parties to the treaty. Hence, Finland would have to persuade all parties, including Russia, to the idea of the rearmament of the Åland Islands.

To get around the expected opposition of Russia, the Finnish government might declare the bilateral agreement of 1940 invalid, based on coercion as it came a few months after the Winter War with the Soviet Union and in the face of great tension between both states. The possibility to invalidate treaties concluded under coercion of threat or use of force is unconditional and indefinite. It does not apply, however, to an aggressor state, so it cannot be used to invalidate the peace treaty signed by Finland in 1947 after it had been a Third Reich ally.

To free itself from the obligations imposed by the latter treaty, Finland may consider unilateral withdrawal from that treaty's Part II Art. 5, which provides for demilitarisation of the islands. Finland has already denounced Part V of the treaty setting limits on the strength of its armed forces and it did not meet with opposition. However, the provisions imposing limits on armaments were intended to regulate the situation immediately after World War II and, therefore, were not meant to be permanent. In contrast, the provision regarding the status of the Åland Islands referred to an area that already had been demilitarised. The aim was to confirm the inviolability of the status quo despite the profound changes in the security architecture of the Baltic Sea region after World War II. It is likely that any attempt to unilaterally withdraw from that treaty's Art. 5 would be met with protest from Russia.

The Finnish government might invoke the *rebus sic stantibus* principle, arguing that there has been a fundamental change of circumstances in the security environment with the annexation of Crimea that justifies termination of Art. 5 and rearmament of the islands. This would require, however, proving that the overall level of Finland's security is lower than it was in 1947 and that such reduction could not be foreseen at the time of the signing of the treaty. The latter requirement in particular appears to be impossible to demonstrate. So even if Finland could get the consent of the parties to withdraw from the agreements of 1856 and 1921, and could challenge the validity of the 1940 treaty, it would remain obligated to demilitarise the Åland Islands under the peace treaty of 1947.

To re-arm the islands, the Finnish government would have to violate the treaty of 1947, which could provoke a political and military reaction from Russia. Such a move would also serve Russian propaganda that the current European security architecture based on the norms of international law is not in the interests of either Russia or the West.

Deterrence and Defence. Finland's defence policy is based on credible territorial defence and maintaining good, neighbourly relations with Russia. With the increasing threats in the Baltic Sea region, Finland is attempting, however, to strengthen defence cooperation with the Nordic countries, the EU and NATO. Since joining the EU in 1995, Finland has not been a neutral state and formally can count on the security guarantees under Art. 42.7 of the Treaty on the European Union. In practice, however, it would be difficult because the Union itself does not have defence plans and does not possess designated national or multinational military units for such operations. If there is a threat against Finland, it would have to rely on bilateral cooperation with EU countries, particularly Sweden, which has promised to defend its eastern neighbour. The close cooperation of the two countries includes the formation of joint naval and land units and provision of airports and harbours for defensive operations.

Finland and Sweden also coordinate their cooperation with NATO in the "28+2" format, however, Finland cannot count on NATO Art. 5 security guarantees. Although Finland could meet the conditions of NATO membership, accession seems particularly unlikely given the low public support for it (less than 25%). Even so, Finland and Sweden have signed agreements with NATO for host nation support, which regulates the stationing of military forces and opens the way for enhanced exercises on their territory. In an emergency, these agreements could allow for the deployment of NATO and EU troops within a "coalition of the willing," or on a bilateral basis.

Finland may have enhanced its chances for such support during NATO's Warsaw Summit in July when it signed an agreement on closer military cooperation with the UK and, on 7 October, a declaration on closer defence cooperation with the United States. Sweden signed similar agreements with the UK and U.S. a couple of months earlier. The two countries also are interested in the development of cooperation with Poland. In June, Sweden and Finland sent troops to "Anaconda 2016," the largest Western military manoeuvres in the region based on territorial defence scenarios.

Conclusions. Finland cannot easily change the demilitarised and neutral status of the Åland Islands as it is guaranteed by international agreements. With the risk of Russia re-establishing a military presence on the archipelago, however, it is necessary to strengthen Finland's capacity to defend it. To achieve this, the country would have to further develop cooperation with Sweden, which can quickly deploy naval and land-based anti-ship and air-defence systems near the islands to complicate offensive operations. At the regional level, the main area of cooperation, including the participation of Poland, should include the exchange of information and intelligence and the creation of a civil-military monitoring system to track vessels that might be used in a hybrid scenario that does not cross the threshold of war. Because Russia has demonstrated its readiness to use nuclear weapons in regional conflicts, deterrence will require more frequent exercises involving NATO countries, particularly the U.S. and the UK. The visible presence of these nuclear powers in the Baltic Sea region would be an important political and military signal that any regional actor must take them into account.