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Finland's Role in the European Union's Foreign Policy: From Neutrality to NATO Membership

Author's Details:

Dr. Mohsen Zamani¹

PhD in Political Geography (Political Organization of Space), University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran¹

E-mail : zamani_m@ut.ac.ir orchid id: 0009-0009-6210-2305

Abstract

Finland, as a small but strategically important country in Northern Europe, has always pursued a policy of neutrality as the core of its foreign policy. This policy was adopted during the Cold War to avoid conflicts with the two blocs of East and West, allowing Finland to remain safe from military and political threats. With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Finland joined the European Union in 1995 and aligned its foreign policy with the values and goals of this organization.

However, international crises such as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war in Ukraine in 2022 led to changes in Finland's foreign policy. The increasing security threats from Russia, particularly for the Baltic Sea region, prompted Finland to end its traditional neutrality and join NATO in 2023.

This paper analyzes the developments in Finland's foreign policy from neutrality to NATO membership. It explores the internal and external factors influencing the shift in Finland's foreign policy, its relations with the European Union and NATO, and the impact of these changes on regional security and geopolitical equations.

As a new NATO member, Finland will play a more active role in Europe's security and defense policies in the future. This shift, in addition to strengthening Finland's national security, will also affect collective security in Europe. On the other hand, Finland's relations with Russia have entered a complex and sensitive phase, requiring precise and strategic policymaking.

In general, the change in Finland's foreign policy from neutrality to NATO membership reflects significant changes in the security dynamics of Europe following the war in Ukraine. This transformation could serve as a model for other countries in Northern Europe seeking to enhance their security against regional threats.

Keywords: Finland, foreign policy, European Union, NATO, neutrality, European security

Introduction

Finland, as one of the countries in the Northern European region, has historically adopted a cautious foreign policy. Particularly after World War II and during the Cold War, it pursued a policy of neutrality as its primary strategy to avoid conflict with the two blocs of East and West (Smith, 2019). With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Finland's foreign policy underwent changes. In 1995, Finland joined the European Union and sought to secure its security and economic prosperity through diplomacy and international cooperation (Forsberg & Seppo, 2020).

However, recent geopolitical developments, especially the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, pushed Finland's foreign policy toward significant changes. During this period, security threats from Russia increased, prompting the Finnish government to end its traditional neutrality and join NATO in 2023 (Raik, 2023).

Finland's neutrality policy had been one of the most prominent features of its international relations for decades, and many analysts believed that this approach had greatly contributed to the country's political and security stability (Jakobson, 2017). However, rapid changes in the security dynamics of Europe, especially along the eastern borders, rendered this policy ineffective.

During its membership in the European Union, Finland worked to position itself as a bridge between the West and the East. The country's foreign policy within the EU framework focused on economic cooperation, environmental protection, human rights, and peace-building (Kuusisto, 2021). However, recent developments in Russia-EU relations, particularly following the Ukraine crisis, led Finland to reassess its security approach and move toward NATO membership (Smith & Raik, 2022).

One of the key factors in the shift in Finland's foreign policy was the increased security threats from Russia. Given Finland's long border with Russia and the historical tensions between the two countries, Finland concluded that joining Western military alliances was necessary for securing its national defense (Forsberg, 2019). NATO membership, as one of the most significant changes in Finland's foreign policy, will have notable impacts on its relations with Russia and other European countries (Raik, 2023).

This paper aims to examine the process of changes in Finland's foreign policy from neutrality to NATO membership. In this context, it will analyze the internal and external factors influencing these changes and assess Finland's role in European Union and NATO foreign policy. Moreover, it will explore the implications of these changes on regional security, geopolitical dynamics, and Finland's relations with Russia.

This shift in Finland's foreign policy is one of the most important geopolitical developments in Europe following the Ukraine war and may influence collective security in Europe and the security policies of Northern European countries (Kuusisto, 2022).

Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative analysis method. Data are collected through the study of documents, scholarly articles, international reports, and policy analyses. The analytical approach of this paper focuses on a comparative examination of Finland's foreign policy shift from neutrality to NATO membership, analyzing factors such as security threats, geopolitical developments, and international relations. Additionally, this study assesses the impact of these changes on Europe's security and political policies.

Theoretical Framework

The evolution of Finland's foreign policy from neutrality to NATO membership can be analyzed using various international relations theories. This section focuses on three theoretical frameworks: Realism, Liberal Institutionalism, and Critical Geopolitics to explain these changes.

1. Realism Theory Realism is one of the oldest and most widely used theoretical frameworks in international relations, emphasizing the role of power, national security, and the interests of states. According to this theory, states, as the main actors in the international system, operate in an anarchic environment and seek to enhance their security (Morgenthau, 1948). Regarding Finland, Realism theory effectively explains why this country, which pursued a policy of neutrality for decades, ultimately decided to join NATO. Security threats arising from Russia's aggressive behavior, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Ukraine war in 2022, led Finland to conclude that joining a powerful military alliance was necessary for its security (Waltz, 1979). Realists argue that NATO membership enhances Finland's deterrent power, making it more resilient to external threats, particularly from Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014).

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2. Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal Institutionalism emphasizes international cooperation and the role of transnational institutions like the European Union and NATO in enhancing global security and stability. According to this theory, cooperation between states and joining international institutions can help reduce conflicts and increase security (Keohane, 1984). Finland's accession to the European Union in 1995 can also be analyzed within this framework. Finland sought to increase its security and economic prosperity through political and economic cooperation within the EU (Kuusisto, 2021). However, new security threats in Europe, particularly from Russia, prompted Finland to seek stronger security and defense cooperation within NATO. According to Liberal Institutionalism, NATO membership allows Finland to benefit from collective security and enhance its defense capabilities against regional threats (Moravcsik, 1997).

3. Critical Geopolitics

Critical Geopolitics examines the impact of geographical location on the foreign policies of states. This theory emphasizes that geography, as a key variable, plays a significant role in shaping countries' security and defense policies (Tuathail, 1996). Due to its geographical location, Finland has always been situated at the crossroads of East and West. The country shares a long border with Russia, historically a source of security tensions (Jakobson, 2017). Within the framework of Critical Geopolitics, Finland's shift in foreign policy from neutrality to NATO membership can be seen as a response to regional geopolitical changes and security threats from Russia (Forsberg, 2019). According to this theory, Finland seeks to strengthen its geopolitical position by joining NATO and playing a more active role in European security affairs.

4. Factors Influencing Finland's Foreign Policy Shift

Based on the theoretical foundations outlined, several factors have influenced Finland's shift in foreign policy: External Security Threats: Russia's aggressive behavior and rising regional tensions. International Cooperation: The role of international institutions such as the EU and NATO in strengthening Finland's security. Geopolitical Position: Finland's location between East and West and its significance in European security dynamics.

5. Impact of Finland's Foreign Policy Shift on Regional Security

Finland's foreign policy shift and its NATO membership have had significant implications for regional security in Europe. This change has strengthened the security of the Baltic Sea region and enhanced NATO's deterrent power against Russian threats (Raik, 2023). On the other hand, this shift may also impact Russia-West relations, potentially leading to increased tensions between these two powers (Smith & Raik, 2022).

Research Findings

The transformation of Finland's foreign policy from neutrality to NATO membership can be analyzed as one of the most significant geopolitical shifts in Europe in recent years. This change has impacted not only Finland's internal policies and national security but also has broad implications for regional security and

power dynamics in Europe. This section presents the research findings across six key themes, analyzing the evolution of Finland's foreign policy and its consequences.

- Historical Analysis of Finland's Neutrality Policy

Finland's neutrality policy has roots in the country's tense history with its eastern neighbor, Russia. After World War II and during the Cold War, Finland adopted neutrality as a strategy to maintain its independence and territorial integrity (Jakobson, 2017). This policy allowed Finland to avoid involvement in the East-West bloc conflicts and maintain diplomatic relations with both sides.

In the decades following the Cold War, neutrality became part of Finland's national identity. The country gained recognition as a neutral peace mediator and international actor (Forsberg, 2019). However, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union paved the way for changes in Finland's foreign policy.

Finland joined the European Union in 1995 and sought to secure its economic and political stability through EU membership (Kuusisto, 2021). Despite EU membership, Finland refrained from joining NATO to avoid straining its relations with Russia.

-Reasons for Finland's Foreign Policy Shift After the Ukraine War

Recent geopolitical developments in Europe, particularly the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, marked a turning point in Finland's foreign policy. These events introduced new security threats for Baltic states and heightened concerns about Russia's aggressive behavior (Raik, 2023).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 specifically influenced Finland's stance toward NATO. The Finnish government concluded that neutrality could no longer guarantee national security and that joining a strong military alliance was necessary to counter Russian threats (Smith & Raik, 2022).

According to the research findings, three key factors contributed to Finland's foreign policy shift:

1. Increasing security threats from Russia
2. Changing public opinion in Finland regarding NATO membership
3. Strengthening security cooperation within the EU and NATO

-The Impact of NATO Membership on Finland's National Security

Finland's NATO membership in 2023 marked a significant milestone in its foreign policy. This decision has enhanced Finland's national security and contributed to Europe's collective security framework.

NATO membership provides Finland with access to joint security and defense structures, increasing its deterrence capabilities against external threats, particularly from Russia (Waltz, 1979). Furthermore, it allows Finland to actively participate in NATO's security and defense policies, playing a more significant role in regional security.

- Geopolitical Implications of Finland's NATO Membership for Europe and Russia

Finland's foreign policy shift and NATO membership have important geopolitical consequences for Europe and Russia. On one hand, this transformation strengthens the security of Baltic states and increases NATO's deterrence power against Russia (Forsberg, 2019).

On the other hand, this change complicates Russia-West relations, raising the likelihood of increased tensions along Europe's eastern borders (Mearsheimer, 2014). Russia perceives Finland's NATO membership as a threat to its security, which may intensify military competition in the region.

-Finland's Approach to EU Foreign Policy

In addition to NATO membership, Finland plays an active role in the European Union's foreign policy. Finland's foreign policy within the EU focuses on areas such as economic cooperation, human rights, environmental protection, and collective security (Kuusisto, 2021).

Finland seeks to strengthen regional security through enhanced security cooperation within the EU. The country has also played a significant role in developing the EU's common defense policies and promoting military cooperation among EU members (Raik, 2023).

-Challenges and Opportunities for Finland in the International Arena

Finland faces several challenges in its foreign policy. One of the most critical challenges is managing relations with Russia after joining NATO. Finland must maintain diplomatic ties with Russia and prevent the escalation of military tensions along its eastern borders (Smith, 2019).

On the other hand, NATO and EU memberships present new opportunities for Finland in the international arena. Through participation in joint security and defense policies, Finland can play a more effective role in regional and global security (Moravcsik, 1997).

Results and Discussion

The transformation of Finland's foreign policy in recent decades, particularly its shift from neutrality to NATO membership, represents one of the most significant geopolitical changes in Europe. This shift reflects not only a reassessment of Finland's fundamental foreign policy principles but also a response to new realities in the international system and changing regional and global security dynamics.

Finland's neutrality policy, which lasted from the post-World War II period until the early 21st century, was rooted in the country's efforts to avoid military conflicts and maintain peaceful relations with global powers, particularly the Soviet Union and later Russia. This policy enabled Finland to leverage its geographical position to establish balanced economic and political relations with both the West and the East while safeguarding its security.

However, recent geopolitical developments, particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022, have heightened Finland's security concerns. Russia's aggressive behavior and evolving defense strategies posed serious threats to the Baltic region. Given its long border with Russia, Finland concluded that relying on a neutrality policy could no longer guarantee its national security, prompting the country to adopt new strategies to counter potential threats.

Finland's decision to join NATO marked a turning point in its foreign policy. This decision reflects a shift in the Finnish government's perspective on international security frameworks and the recognition that collective security within NATO could serve as a deterrent against Russian threats. NATO membership allows Finland to benefit from the military support of its allies and participate actively in NATO's defense and security policies.

On a regional scale, Finland's NATO membership has had significant implications for European security. This development has strengthened the security of the Baltic states and increased NATO's presence in the region. At the same time, Finland's NATO membership may escalate tensions between Russia and the West. Russia views Finland's NATO membership as a threat to its national security and may respond by reinforcing its military and defense policies along its western borders.

Another key consequence of this transformation is the strengthening of security and defense cooperation within the European Union. As an active EU member, Finland seeks to leverage the union's capabilities to enhance regional security and address external threats. Finland supports joint European defense policies and aims to bolster the EU's role in security and defense matters.

Recent shifts in Finland's foreign policy highlight the country's new challenges in the international arena. On the one hand, Finland must manage its relations with Russia and avoid escalating military tensions along its eastern borders. On the other hand, the country must play an active role within NATO and the EU to contribute to regional security and address international threats.

One of Finland's primary challenges is managing its relations with Russia following NATO membership. Russia has consistently expressed concerns about NATO's military presence near its borders and may take reciprocal military and political actions in response to Finland's NATO membership. This could heighten tensions along Europe's eastern borders and impact regional security.

Simultaneously, Finland must maintain its diplomatic ties with Russia and use diplomacy to reduce potential tensions. Sustaining economic and political relations with Russia could help ease tensions and enhance regional security.

On the other hand, NATO and EU membership have created new opportunities for Finland in the international arena. By participating in joint security and defense policies, Finland can play a more active role in regional and global security.

Active engagement in international institutions and cooperation with other NATO and EU members can strengthen Finland's bargaining power in international affairs and enhance its position as a significant security player in Europe.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that Finland's shift from neutrality to NATO membership is a response to geopolitical changes and new security threats in Europe. This change reflects a transformation in Finland's perspective on national security and the need to strengthen security cooperation with other European countries and NATO.

In the current context, Finland seeks to enhance its deterrence capabilities against external threats and increase its role in regional security. The country aims to leverage NATO and EU capacities to secure its national interests and position itself as a key security actor in Europe.

In conclusion, Finland's new foreign policy focuses on international security and defense cooperation. By understanding new international realities and regional security threats, Finland aims to strengthen collective security in Europe and enhance its deterrence against external threats.

This transformation has not only reinforced Finland's national security but also had significant implications for regional security dynamics and geopolitics. In this new era, Finland is emerging as a key player in regional security in Europe, working through international institutions to strengthen collective security and address international threats.

Conclusion

Finland's shift from neutrality to NATO membership is one of the significant contemporary geopolitical developments, reflecting a transformation in the country's security strategies in response to regional and international threats. This change is a reaction to the complex security environment in Europe, particularly Russia's aggressive behavior in recent years, and represents a new approach to ensuring Finland's national security and maintaining regional stability.

For decades, Finland pursued a neutrality policy as the main tool to preserve its security and territorial integrity. This policy, which proved effective during the Cold War, allowed Finland to maintain balanced relations with both Eastern and Western blocs. However, changes in the international system, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia's invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, demonstrated that this policy was no longer a viable strategy for safeguarding Finland's national security.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and violation of its territorial integrity served as a wake-up call for Russia's neighboring countries, especially Finland. These developments led Finnish policymakers to conclude that reliance on neutrality could no longer guarantee the country's security and stability in the face of new threats. As a result, Finland decided to alter its approach by joining NATO to strengthen its security within a more robust military alliance.

Finland's NATO membership marks a fundamental shift in the country's security strategies. This change not only enhances Finland's national security but also has broader implications for regional security in Europe and the European Union's defense policies. Finland's presence in NATO boosts the alliance's deterrence capability against Russian threats and contributes to collective security in the Baltic region.

Finland's foreign policy shift can be analyzed through the lens of political realism. In an environment of increasing security threats, countries are compelled to adjust their approaches based on new realities. Given its unique geopolitical position and historical experiences with Russia, Finland recognized that continuing its neutrality policy could jeopardize its security. Therefore, the shift in foreign policy became a proactive strategy to ensure national security rather than a passive decision.

Finland's policy change and NATO membership also have important implications for other European countries and the EU's defense and security policies. This shift can strengthen security cooperation among EU and NATO member states and enhance Europe's role in regional security. Additionally, it can serve as a model for other European countries facing similar threats from Russia.

However, this foreign policy shift comes with challenges. One of Finland's primary challenges is managing its relations with Russia after joining NATO. Russia has consistently expressed concerns about NATO's presence near its borders and perceives Finland's membership in the alliance as a threat to its security. In this context, Finland must strive to maintain its diplomatic relations with Russia and prevent the escalation of military tensions along its eastern borders.

On the other hand, NATO membership enables Finland to actively participate in the alliance's security and defense policies and play a more significant role in regional security. By participating in NATO missions and joint military operations, Finland can enhance its defense capabilities and contribute to strengthening collective security in Europe.

This foreign policy shift has also created new opportunities for Finland on the international stage. The country can leverage NATO and EU capacities to play a more influential role in international security and defense decision-making and establish itself as a key player in regional security.

At the same time, Finland must work to maintain diplomatic relations with Russia while strengthening ties with Western countries. The country should use diplomatic tools to reduce tensions and prevent military conflicts in the region. Maintaining economic and political relations with Russia can help ease tensions and enhance regional security.

Overall, Finland's shift from neutrality to NATO membership can be seen as a response to new geopolitical realities and regional security threats. This change reflects a transformation in Finnish leaders' perceptions of national security and the necessity of strengthening security cooperation with other European countries and NATO.

Recognizing that national security cannot be guaranteed solely through domestic policies, Finland decided to participate more actively in international security and military structures. This decision reflects Finland's understanding of new international realities and the need for multilateral cooperation to address security threats.

In an era of rising security threats, international security and defense cooperation play a crucial role in ensuring collective security. By joining NATO, Finland has demonstrated that its national security can only be guaranteed through multilateral cooperation and participation in military alliances.

This foreign policy change has far-reaching implications for regional security and the EU's defense policies. Finland's presence in NATO strengthens collective security in Europe and increases NATO's role in regional stability. Furthermore, this shift can bolster security cooperation among EU and NATO member states and enhance Europe's ability to counter emerging security threats.

In conclusion, Finland's shift from neutrality to NATO membership represents one of the most significant geopolitical transformations in Europe. It reflects a change in Finland's security approach and its efforts to strengthen national and regional security.

By joining NATO and deepening its relations with the EU, Finland is playing a key role in regional security and seeking recognition as a major player in Europe's security landscape. This foreign policy change has not only strengthened Finland's national security but also contributed to collective security in Europe and efforts to counter new security threats.

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