

The Demilitarisation and Neutralisation of Åland,  
a Stabilising Force for Peace in the Region

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*Mr President, Madame Premier, Mr Speaker of the Åland Parliament, Ministers, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, bästa vänner.*

The Åland Islands in the hands of a foreign power is “like a pistol aimed at the heart of Sweden.” Similar quotes had their place in history in relation to other conflicts as well, to my understanding. However, this quote is a free translation of a quote often stumbled upon when one reads the history books on the conflict between Finland and Sweden one hundred years ago.

The demilitarisation and neutralisation of the Åland Islands was one element of the conflict resolution by the League of Nations in 1920, with the aim of stabilizing the region and bringing lasting peace to it.

Today one can say that the Åland Islands’ position in the sea between Finland and Sweden is like a bridge between us. Today the life of many people from Åland, be it business, studies or hobbies, is closely connected with both Finland and Sweden. We are happy to celebrate one hundred years of autonomy for the Åland Islands together.

The history of the Åland Islands, Finland and Sweden is closely linked together. The Åland Islands was a part of Sweden until 1809 when Sweden lost it and Finland to Russia. As we know, Finland celebrated its centenary a few years ago as we gained our independence from Russia in 1917.

Independent Finland came to include the same areas as the Grand Duchy of Finland, and hence the Åland Islands. Back in those days a movement arose on the Åland Islands regarding reunification with Sweden. The idea gained strong support from Sweden. As the conflict strained the relations between the two neighbours, Finland and Sweden, the issue was taken to the League of Nations to be solved. In its decision of the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1921 the League of Nations concluded that first, sovereignty of the Åland Islands is recognized to belong to Finland, second, further guarantees to be inserted in the autonomy law should aim at preservation of the Swedish language and at maintenance of the landed property in the hands of the Islanders, and that three, an international agreement in respect to non-fortification and the neutralisation of the Archipelago should guarantee to the Swedish people and to all the countries concerned that the Åland Islands will never become a source of danger from a military point of view. The Convention of 1856 should be replaced by a broader agreement placed under the guarantee of all the Powers concerned.

The Convention of 1856 was the first time the international law status of the Åland Islands was dealt with. The Convention on the demilitarisation of the Åland Islands was concluded between Russia, Great Britain and France in Paris on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1856, after the Crimean war. This Convention was complemented with a new multilateral Convention respecting

the non-fortification and neutralisation of the Åland Islands, signed in Geneva on 20th October 1921. Finland and the Soviet Union concluded a separate treaty concerning the Åland Islands on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1940. The treaty was reinstated in 1948 after the Second World War.

The Russian consulate in Mariehamn was also established in the treaty of 1940. Further, the Paris peace treaty of 1947 concluded that the Åland Islands shall remain demilitarized in accordance with the situation as it then was.

Hence the international law status of the Åland Islands remains on solid ground. The 1921 Convention also specifically concludes that the provisions of the Convention shall remain in force in spite of any changes that may take place in the present status quo in the Baltic Sea. The status of the Åland Islands is also regarded as customary law binding on all states in the region.

Let me stress the importance of this provision in the Convention: “shall remain in force in spite of any changes that may take place in the present status quo in the Baltic Sea”. The Baltic Sea region is located in a strategically important area, which directly reflects changes in the international security situation. We see that security in Northern Europe is increasingly interlinked, any shifts in the security situation in the Baltic Sea region, the Arctic neighborhood and the North Atlantic are closely connected. The increasing competition between the great powers and weakening commitment to the rules-based international system and international law have also increased tensions in the Baltic Sea region.

After a peak in military action and tensions in 2014 the security situation in the Baltic Sea has now slightly stabilised. Finland aims to reduce tensions as we have great interest in the stability of the Baltic Sea.

One of the main objectives of our close cooperation with Sweden is to strengthen security on the Baltic Sea. In collaboration with all Nordic and Baltic countries we promote the security of the region. It is also important to engage in dialogue with Russia on issues related to the Baltic Sea and its security.

The Åland Islands, situated in the middle of the Baltic Sea, is affected by the shifts in tension in the region. The Government report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy from 2020 states that the province of Åland Islands has recognized status under international law and that this does not prevent Finland from intensifying its defence cooperation with various actors.

With this, I return to the argument that the international law status of the Åland Islands remains on solid ground. The convention has lasted for one hundred years and stands for

stability and peace in the region. The demilitarisation and the neutralisation as concepts have lasted through varied times and their basis remains the same. Apart from its legally binding nature, it has also symbolic weight which in return creates security and stability. It is also an important example of rules-based multilateral cooperation.

Your Excellencies, according to the Government Programme a stronger priority will be placed on conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding in Finland's foreign policy.

We will do this by for example increasing our participation in the United Nations' mediation and dialogue processes. Stepping up networking with Finnish peace mediation-actors is another important tool. We will continue to promote women's meaningful participation in peace talks and peacebuilding, with an emphasis on safeguarding women's and girls' rights in peace processes.

We will also support activities related to the inclusion of youth in peace processes. The Center of Peace Mediation, a new unit, that has started its work at the Ministry last October, has the important task of looking at ways to increase our concrete support for peace processes.

Violent conflicts are becoming more complex. This change challenges traditional peace mediation. In the changing conflict landscape a multitrack approach will be key. All actors should work in a complementary and coordinated manner. Local ownership and inclusive processes are key for creating and sustaining lasting peace. For Finland, the ownership of conflict parties is a central element; we cannot support the process unless the parties themselves are committed to it. Our task is to support the conflict parties' efforts.

The Åland Islands provide an important example of how conflicts can be solved in a peaceful manner. It is one of the most well-known successes of the League of Nations. At the same time, one must remember that each violent conflict is unique. We need to try to find context-specific solutions.

I am glad that the example continues to provide inspiration for many countries and regions in the world even today. I am also glad that we have been able to promote the Åland Islands' example at a very high level – for example, in the European Union in summer 2019, the security policy ambassadors visited Mariehamn during their visit to Finland. We had an excellent discussion on peace mediation facilitated by the Åland Islands Peace Institute and the CMI.

The Contact Group between the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and the Government of Åland was established over twenty years ago in 1998 to develop and increase the use of the Åland example in international contexts, and to increase awareness about the province and contacts with it. The group actively holds seminars with this aim in mind, the next of

which will be held during the Åland 100 celebrations in the Hague at the Peace Palace in cooperation with our embassy there.

Likewise, at the initiative of the Government of Åland, Finland has been pleased to introduce the self-governing province of the Åland Islands as a new Associate Member of UNESCO during the General Conference in November. This is also a testimony to the Åland Islands' commitment to UNESCO's work. We look forward to a positive stand by UNESCO's general conference and having the Åland Islands as UNESCO's twelfth associate member.

The demilitarisation and neutralisation of the Åland Islands is an important piece in the puzzle of creating a sustainable and lasting solution to the conflict between Finland and Sweden. I know that sustainability issues are high on the political agenda of Åland. In this regard I want to pay tribute to the Åland Islands' valuable work on sustainability issues which led to the Åland Islands sustainability agenda winning the European Sustainability Award in 2019.

With this, I conclude my speech and once again pay tribute to the 100 year-old Convention and the centenary of the Åland Islands.

Thank you.