Europe Must Stay Vigilant

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Mika Aaltola



– Mika Aaltola on Geopolitics, Security, and Finland's Role

Theodor Himmel: Mr. Aaltola, thank you very much for taking the time and for joining us in this interview for our magazine, EPIS Magazine for International and Foreign Affairs.

We reached out to you since you are the Finnish MEP who is also concerned with security affairs and international affairs. Coming to that topic later, I first want to delve into your career — your path to becoming an MEP. You have studied, as one can see when searching for you, in various places —also in the U.S. and across Europe, at several universities. Why did you reach out to the world?

Mika Aaltola: Well, it happened — you know, events, events, events. So, yes, I have been focusing on foreign affairs and international relations for 30 years. Different universities, different institutions. And then the war happened. Obviously, I had a constant presence in Finnish media. People were watching me, listening to me, and trusting my abilities. For example, Finnish NATO membership — it's really important to understand what is happening. And ultimately, if you are a very policy-oriented person and have a huge background, then this could be extremely relevant. The difference between policy relevance and politics is difficult to define. And people trusted me. I was the most popular expert in the studies in Finland in 2022. I was, just last month, among the top ten experts, even though I am already a politician. So, it wasn't really a big step. I was continuing on other platforms what I had done previously — focusing on expertise. I think in today's world, we place quite a lot of emphasis on personal experience.

Theodor Himmel: What made you one of the top ten experts? Because you told the truth, or because you told people what they wanted to hear?

Mika Aaltola: I think it was a combination. Events shape how a person is perceived. So I wasn't thinking about politics — I was thinking about explaining to people, in layperson's terms, what is actually happening. We are now in a situation where 1,300 kilometers of border separate Finland from a major large-scale war in its neighborhood. It was important to bring that information to the people — what it means, what consequences radiate from Ukraine because of the Russian war, and how those consequences affect the lives of people in Finland. So, I wanted to prepare and mobilize people so that they were ready for different eventualities — like Finnish NATO membership. We prepared both decision-makers and the public for the decisions that had to be made, according to my scenarios. That moment, when the Finnish nation started to arise and awaken, was combined with German guidance — understanding what was actually happening.

There are different explanations for what happened when Finland decided to join NATO and sign the membership application. It was the people who decided it. What was less understood was the dynamics behind it. What happened with NATO was that public opinion shifted radically. There was a fundamental shift in Finnish perceptions of the world. The question then became: how can this be translated into a political process and into concrete policy decisions.

People associated me with expertise that was relevant to them. I recognized that this was a key moment. Of course, it required career planning. At that time, I was the director of the Finnish Institute for International Affairs, and I enjoyed my position. Politics, however, is a bit more unpredictable. You never know what will happen in politics. As a senior researcher back then, I had certain benefits — I could focus entirely on the issues I loved. But I thought hard about whether to enter politics, and I could clearly sense that there was a demand for my kind of politics. In life, you have to find the courage within yourself to take career jumps from time to time. That's

what happened to me. But it wouldn't have been possible without popular support from the people.

Theodor Himmel: I agree. The Russian attack on Ukraine was a life-changing moment — for some people, it meant finding a new direction. Later, I would like to discuss your role as a politician, but first, I want to focus on your role as the director of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs. What made you choose that path?

In our think tank, there are many students who are deciding whether to pursue an academic career, a political career, or a career in the private sector. You have now done two of these three. Why did you start with an academic career?

Mika Aaltola: It was a compelling choice. My father is a retired professor — apples don't fall far from the tree. I had an instinctive interest in academia and considered a postdoctoral career in academic life. It wasn't unfamiliar to me because of my family background. I actually enjoyed writing. When you finish a good sentence in a book or article, it feels satisfying. I suppose that's one of the aims in life — to feel happy. And there were many moments like that. I enjoyed the intellectual work, but I have always had this tendency to seek relevance. I didn't want my studies to be purely theoretical exercises — describing abstract phenomena in the world — but rather to have real-world impact. I wanted my work to be relevant for policy, to serve as policy advice. That's why my recommendation to anyone is: stay relevant. But the result of staying relevant is that it can also lead you to crossroads in your career. If you are relevant, doors and windows may open unexpectedly, and you have to make choices. If you don't stay relevant in an academic career, then the doors to politics likely won't open. I didn't plan it — it just happened. There is an element of serendipity in life. That's the fundamental explanation for things that you don't expect to happen.

Theodor Himmel: Speaking of that relevancy and the moments when a chance opens a door in life — Finland, in the last two years, has become much more relevant in terms of security concerns from a NATO perspective, now being one of the latest NATO members. How has this changed the security landscape in Finland? I would imagine that it has changed very rapidly and on a fundamental basis. But in what specific aspects has this shift come into effect?

Mika Aaltola: Well, I have studied quite a lot of classical works, and one that comes to mind is Carl von Clausewitz and his key work On War. One of the central insights from that book is this: If you are a nation located in a geopolitically crucial position — like Finland, which shares a long border with Russia and has a history of being a strategic defense power — then you need to have a "stick." You need defensive power. Finland has always invested in its defense, and now we have to further increase our defense expenditure in the future. If you have a "stick" and are in a strategically important position, then you will inevitably have friends and allies. That is a fundamental principle of geopolitics.

So, the security landscape has, in some ways, become more unpredictable. At the same time, the global alliance system is facing an increasing lack of trust. Russia, for example, is currently negotiating what it sees as a "victory" in the war with Ukraine. That is why it remains crucial to stick to the basics: take care of yourself, build up your defenses, strengthen deterrence — and then you have less reason to worry.

Theodor Himmel: You mentioned a lack of trust. That is something I wanted to follow up on. Whose trust is lacking, and how does this lack manifest itself?

Mika Aaltola: Well, among the leaders of great powers, there is an increasing temptation to view the world through spheres of influence. For example, Taiwan is an issue for China, Ukraine is an issue for Russia, and Greenland and Canada seem to be issues for the United States. We are moving beyond a rules-based world order toward a power-based world order. And in such a world, power matters more than ever. We can also see how the European Union is doing its best — at an accelerated pace — to increase defense spending. Clearly, the world order is shifting rapidly. The lack of trust I referred to concerns key institutions that uphold the rule-based world order. There is also a divergence of interests between the U.S. and Europe. The old saying used to be: "Keep the U.S. in, the Germans down, and the Russians out." That equation doesn't work anymore, does it?

Theodor Himmel: Well, we still have to keep the Russians out, right?

Mika Aaltola: Yes, they are knocking heavily on our door. And the Germans are no longer "down," while the Americans are considering a partial withdrawal from Europe.

Theodor Himmel: When you mentioned the lack of trust, you were referring to the world order, which is also secured by NATO. But do you also see a lack of trust in other institutions that embody this world order — such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the United Nations Security Council, or global trade agreements, which are meant to ensure that countries cooperate rather than conflict?

For us to refer to the world order, which is also being secured by NATO— you also see a lack of trust when it comes to other institutions that embody this world order, such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the United Nations Security Council, or trade agreements that are meant to ensure that countries cooperate rather than conflict.

Mika Aaltola: Yes, exactly.

Perhaps all of the institutions of the so-called rules-based world order are currently in a difficult situation. Many of the global institutions you mentioned are facing challenges, and there is open confrontation with them. Take the UN Security Council, for example. It is fundamentally based on the power dynamics that emerged after World War II, and we can see that power politics is deeply embedded in its structure. It is possible that the role of the Security Council will become even more significant in the future — especially as great powers increasingly make agreements based on

their power positions rather than shared principles. In that sense, it could still function effectively.

However, many of the institutions that were built during a more peaceful and stable era are now under significant pressure. That is why we have to be extremely cautious in safeguarding these institutions. From a European perspective, their existence is crucial. We have to safeguard NATO — especially the European link within NATO — while also hoping that the Americans will return to a more engaged role in the alliance, as they have done in the past. At the same time, we must protect the European Union, even as we see increasing hostility towards it from certain American actors. In the international media, there are even discussions about the potential use of nuclear weapons against European institutions. In such a world, we must invest in these institutions because they are part of the European way of life. Safeguarding these institutions is now more critical than ever to ensure that Europe maintains its relevance in the future global order. Europe must have a say in shaping its own fate and destiny.

Theodor Himmel: You mentioned safeguarding the European way of life. Earlier, you mentioned that Finland has to increase its military budget, as do other NATO member states. This is, I would say, about safeguarding the NATO alliance and the defense security mechanisms.

But how does Finland participate in safeguarding the European way of life? Does it also contribute by increasing financial funds for the EU? Or what other ways are there to support the European way of life?

Mika Aaltola: I think there are diverse approaches to this. Of course, there is the European Union and its institutions that need safeguarding — because the road ahead is going to be rough. There will be turbulence. When we talk about defense cooperation in Europe, even the European Commission is now focused on the defense of European nations. A new policy is emerging among European states, and interestingly, this also includes the UK. We have moved beyond Brexit very rapidly — largely due to the Russian threat and the active destabilization operations they are conducting in different parts of Europe. So, while this new European defense approach is based on cooperation between European nations, it is also coordinated by the European Commission and various institutions within the EU. It's not quite the federalist dream, but it can still be effective.

The European Union spends about €300 billion per year on defense. However, this spending is inefficient. It is a redundant system — each state is essentially developing the same key military capabilities without real synergy between them. The challenge is to change that. Because €300 billion is a significant amount of money, and if we can reorganize how it is spent, we could actually build capabilities that allow the EU to project force outward — for example, in peacekeeping operations in Ukraine.

Right now, we lack that capability. While there is significant defense power within Europe, it is not structured in a way that allows us to deploy it effectively beyond our borders.

As mentioned what was done yesterday regarding defense and infrastructure spending in Germany: That was a dynamic decision. This will have consequences for the European approach to defense, and it will also affect Finland. At this moment, everything depends on those European countries that can act and have political systems that function in a relatively healthy and effective way.

Theodor Himmel: In the last two questions, I want to focus on policies in Finland. You mentioned that in Germany, a new military funding deal was recently approved by Parliament — but it was not without discussion. A significant portion of the Parliament voted against it, and a large part of the German public voted against increased military spending.

How is the situation in Finland? Is the Finnish population unanimously in favor of increased military spending? Or is there also debate about alternative ways to secure Finnish independence — considering the threat from Russia and the lack of trust in NATO?

Mika Aaltola: Well, Finland has always worked with Russia — historically speaking. And of course, our defense spending in the past was on a good level. In Finland, there is a deeply ingrained attitude that we face a threat from Russia. This is something fundamental to the very notion of the Republic of Finland. Again, referring to Clausewitz, I would say, a voice, and defense is a configuration of politics by other means. What is required is politics that is based on trust — you absolutely need to have trust within society. In the Nordic countries — not only in Finland — we have a high-trust society. And that is the foundation of everything. Some people always ask: These funds have to come from somewhere. So are they being taken away from education and social welfare programs?

My response is usually to turn the question around. For decades, we were increasing budgets for education and social welfare while decreasing defense expenditure. Did that result in something good? Well, it resulted in stagnation — both politically and economically. So perhaps it is now time to invest in defense. And that investment could also become a catalyst for positive movement in our industrial policies. So I don't see this as something far removed from investing in the key foundational characteristics of any state. And if those foundations are in order, then I believe there will also be positive movement in other areas. This creates a sense of belonging — one that is meaningful both at the European level and at the national level. That is why I see security investment as key. Moreover, when people participate in building security, they also build trust within society. Right now, all democracies are in bad shape. We have to correct course. I see that this correction is now happening at the European level and also within many EU member states.

Theodor Himmel: Looking particularly at Finland — we have seen a similar situation in history regarding the threat from Russia.

If we look back 85 years to the Winter War, when the Soviet Union attacked Finland — would you say that the situation today, with the threat

from the East, is similar? Or how has it changed? Is Finland more prepared today? Or does Finland need a second Mannerheim?

Mika Aaltola: I don't think there would be a need for a Mannerheim. What we need is the right attitude toward our eastern neighbor. What is required is a clear understanding of the present and pressing dangers posed by geopolitics. I know that most Finns understand this very clearly, and there are no major disagreements on this issue. If that attitude is made clear, then we are safe. Because this is happening on a European level, it is also important to be here in Brussels. I often recommend that people look at a map — if they can read a map. In certain strategic locations, it is crucial to invest in those who at least stay grounded in reality rather than in conspiracy theories. This is also where support is needed. That is why, when I write, I show maps — because maps are something that people can understand very clearly.

We have an eye for strategic geography, and if you study the map, you will see that different security challenges require different security solutions — in the Nordics, in Eastern Europe, and in Southern Europe. There are different concerns in each of these regions. But if we take all of this into account, we can develop a defense and security package that is a win-win situation for many. And on top of that, there is the industrial policy — investing billions in industries can also create a positive economic environment.

Theodor Himmel: All right. Thank you, Mr. Aaltola, for your time and for the interview.

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