Nobody Intends to Invade Finland

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"We welcome Finland to the Alliance!" – Finland's entry into NATO marks Helsinki's final departure from the principle of neutrality. Closer examination reveals however that this move hardly comes as a surprise but rather that it has been apparent for decades. The Russian invasion of Ukraine now presented an opportunity that Helsinki would be foolish not to seize.

Finland and Russia were originally on rather friendly terms. Both countries maintained significant trade relations, with Russia being one of Finland's most important trading partners and Finland virtually depending

on Russia for its energy supply. The two states also cooperated in regional institutions focussing on economic cooperation or issues related to the Arctic region. Finland's long-standing history of neutrality has moreover allowed Helsinki to maintain friendly relations with both NATO and Moscow.

Nonetheless, the Finns have never fully trusted their Eastern neighbour. Finland joined the EU in 1995 and has maintained cooperation with NATO and the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) ever since. The country has additionally built up military capabilities that are fully interoperable with NATO equipment and has welcomed the NATO membership of its Baltic neighbours Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Moreover, Finland has increasingly perceived Russia as a threat in recent years. Helsinki's 2016 Defense White Paper identified the Kremlin's efforts to increase its sphere of influence and its military activities near the Finnish border as concerning. The 2021 Defense White Paper further highlighted the high readiness of Russian forces and their military manoeuvres close to Finland's border. This reveals that Finland has hardly ever been a truly neutral state.

Helsinki's scepticism towards Moscow can also not be overlooked in the civil sphere. While in 1999 78% of Finns opposed NATO membership, this number has eroded to 43% in January 2022. The Russian invasion of Ukraine then catalysed a shift towards broad public support for NATO accession. Trade between the two countries has also contracted significantly in recent years. In 2022, only 8% of Finnish imports came from Russia, down from 18% in 2013.

Consequently, Finland's accession into NATO is everything but surprising as the last three decades have seen Helsinki increasingly draw away from Russia. Finland's NATO membership should therefore not be considered a surprise, but rather an institutionalisation of what has been a long-time reality. Finland and NATO have not fallen in love recently, they have been sharing a bed for 30 years, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine now arranged a sudden wedding.

All in all, Russia's war against Ukraine has so far only achieved the opposite of what Moscow originally intended. It has brought the West closer together and confirmed suspicions that may have already persisted. The Kremlin has completely burned the little remaining trust it enjoyed and has instead provided its rivals with a justification to further bolster their defence capabilities, in particular concerning Russia. Hence, in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow's remarks that there are no threats to Finland's security read like Ulbricht's "Nobody intends to build a wall". The Finns have made a wise decision to finally withdraw their trust in Moscow. It might guarantee their security in the future.