

## Opening Speech

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*Honourable Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen, kära ålänningar,*

It is a great pleasure for me to open this seminar today. Because of the stormy weather, flight to Åland was impossible. Unfortunately, I cannot join you physically to commemorate the Convention on the Non-fortification and Neutralisation of the Åland Islands, as part of celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Åland Islands' autonomy.

It was exactly one hundred years ago when the representatives of Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Poland, Sweden and the United Kingdom gathered together in Geneva to sign this landmark Convention.

Over time, the Convention has only grown in relevance, becoming an important factor underpinning the Åland Islands' autonomy, as well as regional security and stability.

Let me warmly congratulate the host, *Ålands lagting*, for organising this event. The seminar and its distinguished guests are a sign of the high international esteem in which both the Islands and the Convention are held.

According to the preamble to the Convention, it was signed “in order that these islands may never become a cause of danger from the military point of view”.

To fully appreciate the sombre tone of these words, one needs to remember the history. During the Crimean War in 1854-1856, the Islands had already become a focal point in a Europe-wide conflict, resulting in the demilitarisation of the Islands.

After Finland gained its independence in 1917, the question of Åland's status almost resulted in an open conflict between Finland and Sweden. The solution to this problem was found through international cooperation. The newly established League of Nations granted Finland sovereignty over Åland in 1921. At the same time, Finland made a commitment to guarantee the tradition of the Swedish language and wide self-government on the Islands – along with the historically rooted principles of neutrality and demilitarisation that were enshrined in international guarantees in the Åland Convention.

This combination of autonomy, neutrality and demilitarisation has a unique history that resulted in a unique solution. A solution that was – and is – based on openness, diplomacy and trust. It is also a solution that has stood the test of time and has remained strong even during stormy circumstances.

We must all take heed of the firm international commitment to uphold and respect the Islands' status, and play our role in ensuring that the principles underpinning the Convention also remain robust in the future.

I am happy to note that an issue that was once in danger of generating conflict has been successfully resolved in a manner that is favourable to all.

The Åland Islands is a vibrant community and an important and enriching autonomous part of Finland. It is also one of the many bridges that bring Finland and Sweden increasingly close together. The memories of a threatening conflict are in the distant past.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that the Convention has a strong basis in international law. To succeed – not only in its own region but also globally – commitment to international law and rules-based international order is needed.

Unfortunately, adherence to our common principles cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, upholding international order and legal principles requires constant work and care.

The Convention can also have an impact beyond the Baltic Sea Region. The rules-based international order and multilateral system are prerequisites for global security, and the Åland Convention is a part of this fabric.

Finland is fully committed to upholding international law and international security. But legal principles, however powerful and important, are not enough. The values that underpin them – a willingness of parties to engage in an open-minded dialogue, to build trust, and to seek common solutions – can have global significance.

If and when the order breaks down, or we are lacking in mutual trust and understanding, we need dialogue. In order to ensure that our people can live in true and lasting peace, we need to rebuild trust.

This is why Finland wants to strengthen the international system and our common security. This is why we need to revive the spirit of Helsinki, the spirit of dialogue that grew from the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which was signed in Helsinki almost 50 years ago, in 1975.

The Åland Convention has been, and still is, a stabilising force for peace in the Åland region. It is not a historical relic but a living entity – and a very much needed regime in the Baltic Sea Region.

Today, the Convention will be discussed from many perspectives and from different points of view.

I am convinced that by doing so in a spirit of dialogue, cooperation and trust, we can not only commemorate the Convention in the way that it deserves, but we can find new ways to strengthen the continued success of the Convention and the Åland Islands.