

**Åland Demilitarisation and Neutralisation  
– International Lessons**

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*President Niinistö, Mr Speaker, Ministers, Madame Head of the Åland Government, Members of the Åland parliament, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,*

I am honoured to be here today in Mariehamn to celebrate, together with you, 100 years of self-government and autonomy of the Åland Islands. I would like to thank the Speaker and the Parliament of Åland for the invitation and for arranging today's event.

I look forward to our discussion on the demilitarization and neutralization of Åland. This seminar is indeed an opportunity to look back at history, but also to see how decisions in the past shape our present realities and provide helpful lessons for the future.

In the aftermath of the First World War, the Åland islands was a difficult issue for the Government of Sweden. Tensions were high and there was great uncertainty on how to move forward.

The decision by the Council of the League of Nations and the subsequent Åland Convention created a unique arrangement in which wise leaders at the time used international law and diplomacy to resolve a potentially dangerous dispute of sovereignty. By Finland granting Åland autonomy and cultural rights and by Sweden accepting the decision by the League of Nations, with Åland remaining in Finland, conflict was averted.

Furthermore, it has significantly contributed to Sweden and Finland having today a uniquely close cooperation and relationship. There are few countries today, if any, that are as close as Sweden and Finland. Together we are strong defenders of international law and democracy. We stand shoulder to shoulder in defending human rights, both here in Europe and internationally. We are developing a unique close cooperation also on security. Sweden has this year particularly benefitted from Finland's support for our chairpersonship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Were it not for the solution found to the Åland issue, Sweden and Finland would not be where we are today. And the agreement has held. It has been respected in the Second World War, in the Cold War, and in the latest period of unfortunately increased tension in our part of the world. It continues to ensure the demilitarization of Åland.

The classic principle of the freedom of the seas – *mare liberum* – remains the cornerstone of the rules and principles of international law applicable here in the Baltic Sea. This is a key principle for us, with the Baltic Sea being open for all states – including non-Baltic ones. This openness has always been important for our security. At the same time the special solutions regarding Åland, including demilitarization, have contributed to preventing conflicts and to creating trust. It is telling that the demilitarization of Åland was the focus of an agreement between France, Great Britain and Russia already in 1856. These Great Powers of Europe found reassurances in the demilitarization of this part of the

Baltic Sea, with the central and strategic location it held on many military maps in Europe.

Allow me in this connection also to convey our appreciation for the work being done by the Åland Peace Institute. Your work to encourage discussions on the Åland example between academia, political establishments and civil society representatives remains crucial.

It is so because we see many of the ingredients of the Åland question in 1921 very much present today in frozen or hot conflicts in other parts of Europe and the world, with linguistic and other minorities caught between neighbouring States – too often not ready to take a legal, rational and long-term approach, or bent on using or abusing a privileged power position.

This is, I may add, very much the reality with which Sweden continues to work in holding this year's Chairpersonship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Our priorities have remained defending the European security order, firmly based on international law, upholding the broad security concept of the OSCE, and addressing the many frozen or not so frozen conflicts in the region –Ukraine being a case in point.

Also, in exercising this both challenging and rewarding responsibility Sweden highly appreciates the solid support of Finland. We share the same commitment to international law, to peaceful settlement of disputes, and to the power of negotiation and diplomacy. For this we are, of course, inspired by our own historic experiences, some separate, some shared, including the Åland settlement.

The world needs good examples of how negotiation and diplomacy can bring lasting peace and prosperity. Åland was and remains a symbol of peace, and the value of the Åland example for international peace-making should not be underestimated.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a moving experience to be able to take part in this celebration not via Zoom or Skype, but in real life. It reminds us of what we have gone through in the last 18 months. The pandemic has presented particular challenges to our Nordic border regions. Åland has been no exception, and our governments have had difficult issues to tackle. That said, overall cooperation between the Nordic countries has been close also during the pandemic, and this has helped us to find pragmatic solutions.

Now, as we and the world are opening up, there are new opportunities to further strengthen our cooperation. I particularly welcome that our Ministers for Nordic Cooperation are looking at how we can learn from the crisis, strengthen collaboration, and safeguard our integration.

On a final note, let me say that for Sweden this centennial is also about celebrating our friendship with Åland. Few other countries and regions can boast of such close people-to-people contacts as between neighbours here in the Åland islands and in Sweden.

Many young people from Åland choose to study in Sweden, and some Swedes here in Åland. Many Swedes work in Åland and vice versa. Close cultural cooperation and joint festivals take place, and we share the Swedish language. Almost 10 percent of the population of Åland was born in Sweden, and there are even more people from Åland living in Sweden. These are important bonds to appreciate and to safeguard.

Let us cherish the wisdom of our leaders 100 years ago who laid a basis that continues to serve Åland, and all of Finland and Sweden, so well – and continues to inspire us to do our part in promoting peace and prosperity in our neighbourhood and well beyond.

Thank you.