

Strategic Low Profile and Bridge-Building: Finnish Foreign Policy during Mauno Koivisto's Presidency

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on Finnish foreign policy conducted by Mauno Koivisto, who was the President of Finland between 1981 and 1994. In the beginning of 80s when he took office as president, relationship between superpowers was aggravated and the international tension flared up again, just called as “New Cold War”. However, after the change of political leader of the Soviet Union in 1985, the East and West tension relieved drastically, which eventually led to the end of the Cold War and reunification of Germany. Furthermore, a number of remarkable transformations in Europe began to occur, such as democratization in East European states, collapse of the Soviet Union and acceleration of European economic and political integration.

During the Cold War, Finland maintained its independence by implementing “good-neighboring policies” towards the Soviet Union based on YYA treaty, bilateral military treaty with the Soviet Union (1948)¹⁾, on the other hand, in spite of this, by pursuing policy of neutrality. In the period of “Détente” of 70s, Urho Kekkonen, the President of Finland at the time, carried out policy of active neutrality, which culminated in success of “Helsinki Process” in 1975 and this Finnish policy of bridge-building between East and West increased its presence in the international community.

However, Finnish position and presence as a neutral country fluctuated during the “New Cold War” and the following end of the Cold War. This

1) The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (Sopimus ystävydestä, yhteistoiminnasta ja keskinäisestä avunannosta).

required Finland to adapt to new situations cautiously. Koivisto's style of conducting foreign policies was seemingly too cautious and invisible, in contrast to Kekkonen's, who exercised strong presidential power over both domestic and foreign policy and took remarkable initiatives on international scenes. For that account, Koivisto's foreign policy is often described as "Policy of Constraint (pidättyvyys)" or "Policy of Low Profile (matala profiili)", implying its passivity and inaction, and therefore, it seems that few studies focusing on his foreign policy have conducted yet. I argue that his practices of foreign policy should not be characterized as just passive adaptation to change of international settings, but it should be evaluated more as strategic foreign policy in order to preserve Finnish international position and national interests even during Post-Cold War period. Besides, his "Strategic Low Profile" best served as a role of bridge-builder between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and did contribute to easing of international tension. I take up his policy of bridge-building as one of good examples of conflict resolution implemented in international politics.

2. Prerequisites of Koivisto's Foreign Policy

1) Finnish foreign policy before Koivisto: "Paasikivi-Kekkonen Line"

As President of Finland in postwar period, J. K. Paasikivi (1946-1956) faced difficult situation in maintaining national independence under Soviet's high pressure and determined to pursue good-neighboring policy toward the Soviet Union in order not to come into war with them again and to enhance Finnish political autonomy. He described new foreign policy with regard to relationship with the Soviet as follows;

I believe that in the future Finnish foreign policy should be guided, consistent with our basic national interests, not to go against the Soviet Union. Peace, harmony and confidential neighborly relation with the great Soviet Union is

the first priority of our state's activity²⁾.

As the Cold War advanced, the Soviet increased their pressure on Finland to join Eastern bloc and in 1948, it proposed a military treaty similar to treaties with Hungary and Bulgaria. Paasikivi at first tried to avoid entering into treaty negotiation with the Soviet, but once he realized it would be impossible, then he started to collect all kinds of military treaties from abroad and study them to elaborate Finnish version of treaty with the Soviet Union. Owing to this independent effort from Finnish side, the treaty was signed with limited terms, which was able to make Finland remained out of Eastern bloc. Further, Finland succeeded in inserting the following words "Finland's desire to remain outside the conflicting interests of Great Powers" into preamble of the treaty, that is, it enabled Finland to attain room for pursuing policy of neutrality.

Yet, Paasikivi carried out neutral policy in rather passive and invisible manner, which aimed solely at "remaining outside the conflicting interests of Great Powers", because he had to give top priority to Finnish- Soviet relations and couldn't afford to implement neutral policy actively.

The successor of Paasikivi, U. Kekkonen (1956-1981) sought to diversify Finnish foreign relations to United Nations or Nordic Council, and to develop economic relations with Western European states, encouraged by the mood of relief in the international tension in the late of 50s. In addition, from the late 60s of Détente, Kekkonen strived to pursue neutral policy more actively than Paasikivi. It became known as "active neutral policy (aktiivinenpuolueettomuus politiikka)" which was exercised in the "Nordic Nuclear-Weapons -Free Zone" proposal, initiative as a host country of SALT negotiation between America and the Soviet Union, and CSCE conference. In fact, after the event in Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Soviet Union came to show obvious reluctance to recognize Finnish neutrality, which Kekkonen worried about seriously. He thus attempted to preserve Finnish neutrality without being conflict with the Soviet

2) J. K. Paasikivi, *Paasikiven Linja I : Juho Kusti Paasikiven Puhetta Vuosilta 1944-1956*, Porvoo, Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1958, s. 10.

Union through active initiative of foreign policy.

For example, Kekkonen, under strong pressure from the Soviet Union, took the initiative of holding Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which idea was originally proposed by the Soviet Union since 50's. In this initiative, nevertheless, Kekkonen made Finnish own proposal independently, such as including the U. S. and Canada as formal members to the conference. In doing so, he tried to convince that Finland was not subordinated to the Soviet Union at all, and that Finland sought to achieve substantial result to enhance Détente in Europe. By success of this conference, Kekkonen was able to preserve Finnish neutral position and even enhance Finnish international presence as a bridge-builder between East-West blocs.

The logic of Kekkonen's policy of bridge-building seems to be crystallized in the following manner; Finnish role in international conflict resolution was that of "physicians" not of "judges". This means that, regardless of ideological differences, Finland as a physician would try to serve to cure "disease" (namely, international confrontation in this context) by forming broad consensus and proposing constructive solution.

We consider that it is our task here to narrow differences, to seek constructive solutions, rather than sharpen or sustain existing conflicts or create new ones. We in Finland are, to a large extent, a nation of co-operators; and we know that true co-operation is best advanced by strongly independent-minded individuals. We believe in possibility of harmonizing dissimilar interests for the benefit of all. We see ourselves as physicians rather than judges; it is not for us to pass judgment nor to condemn, it is rather to diagnose and to try to cure³⁾.

2) Domestic factors of Koivisto's winning in presidential election in 1982

After sudden resignation of Kekkonen due to his bad health condition,

3) T. Vilkkuna, ed., (translated by P. Ojansuu and A. Keyworth), *Neutrality: The Finnish Position, Speeches by Dr. Urho Kekkonen, President of Finland*, London, William Heinemann Ltd, 1973, p. 94.

Koivisto, as then Prime minister, became a leading candidate for next presidential election of 1982. He was an rather popular political figure and well-known as an economic expert because of his long carrier as the Chairman of the board of the Bank of Finland, but did not have a background as a member of Parliament. He was also known as an intelligent and witty extempore speaker, using his broad knowledge in freely formulated statements and live interviews, which appealed to Finnish people at large.

As mentioned above, Kekkonen, on the one hand, made full use of his presidential power to influence decision-making of government and exclude anti-Kekkonen faction from influential positions. Naturally there emerged many potential dissidents against Kekkonen's way of holding power and Finnish general public gradually got unsatisfied with politics behind the closed-door, where no politicians seemed to give serious consideration to people's own interests.

On the other hand, in contrast, Koivisto had often criticized Kekkonen's excessive intervention to the activities of government since he was in office as a Prime minister, and owing to lack of his political carrier as an old parliamentary politician, he gained overwhelming support from voters, which was even called as "Koivisto phenomenon". Koivisto's main supporters were young residents living in cities southwest of Finland while Kekkonen's were in agricultural areas in northeast. It can be argued that as the number of people moving to cities had been increased, they became to have loud voices to demand for change of politics to opener and more transparent ones at the new era of post-Kekkonen.

Besides, domestic political situation appeared rather advantageous to Koivisto. In Center Party, to which Kekkonen used to belong, there was a split in selecting a party candidate of presidential election. Most executive members and parliamentary members of the party supported Ahti Karjalainen, who was regarded as the strongest candidate and best successor of Kekkonen, but many of general party members didn't support him especially because of the fact that the Soviet Union had expressed publicly their preference to Karjalainen as a party candidate. At a party conference held in November 1981, a young party

leader, Johannes Virolainen received negative votes against Karjalainen from general party members and was selected as a party candidate⁴⁾. In the presidential election, however, Virolainen couldn't win due to a split within the party, which demised party's credibility.

In addition to this, Finnish-Soviet relation in the beginning of 80's was quite stable, since consensus on "Paasikivi-Kekkonen line" consisted of good relationship with the Soviet Union and policy of neutrality among Finnish major political parties was built already in 70's. For example, in 1965, Social Democratic Party of Finland changed their negative attitude towards Kekkonen and declared that it would support official Finnish foreign policy conducted by Kekkonen. This eased Soviet's suspicion about SDP's foreign policy line and they no longer opposed to election of Koivisto who was a member of SDP as president.

3. Practices of Koivisto's Low Profile Foreign Policy

1) Escalation of tension between the U. S. and the Soviet Union and increasing pressures to Finnish neutral position

Soviet military intervention to Afghanistan in December 1979 and American aggressive foreign policy against the Soviet Union since the formation of Reagan administration in January 1981 escalated tension between superpowers again. In Détente in the middle of 70s, Finland sought to play an active role as a bridge-builder especially in so-called "Helsinki Process" for CSCE and contributed to promotion of détente in Europe. In the beginning of 80s, nonetheless, Finland was forced to restrain their foreign policy initiatives as a neutral bridge-builder cautiously. Because the U.S. and the Soviet Union confronted fundamentally and took a hard-line stance each other, there was little room for neutral Finland to perform active neutral policy.

Under this tense international circumstance, Finland faced serious challenges to their policy of neutrality. Koivisto tried to take a cautious but strategic stance,

4) M. Häikiö, P. Pesonen (translated by H. Himanen), *President Koivisto on the Finnish political scene*, Otava Printing Works, Keuruu, 1992, p. 31.

describing his own foreign policy as “low profile” or “constraint line” and aimed at preserving substantial national interests of Finland⁵⁾.

1-1) American suspicion about credibility of Finnish neutrality: The statement of General Bernard Rogers

The supreme commander of the NATO forces in Europe, General Bernard Rogers, gave an interview to the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* in January 1983. He said: “We know that the Soviet divisions and air force units poised to attack our deployments in Norway would have to use the air space and territories of neutral states. I am, frankly, worried that the governments of Finland and the Soviet Union might make an agreement that the Finns would not fight with the determination that we would hope for”⁶⁾.

Furthermore, when Rogers mentioned the role of European neutral states between East and West, he stated that it was convincing that Switzerland and Sweden would come to defend their territory against any threat of attacks from every direction. However, when it comes to Finland, he showed his negative view on this question, saying as follows:

But how about Finns? Are Finnish people really ready to defend their land and air space—if an attack comes from any directions, namely, including the Soviet Union? I have no idea at all about an answer to this question. You, Finns, have to answer this by yourself⁷⁾.

Koivisto refrained from expressing any views on Finnish will or ability of national defense and told government officials not to mention this issue without

5) Koivisto explains on this point in his book as follows:

“A profile must be low, because otherwise it cannot be raised if the need arises. A certain degree of caution is appropriate in the conduct of foreign affairs, but not passivity.” (K. Immonen and J. Kalela eds., (Translated by G. Coogan), *Mauno Koivisto: Landmarks- Finland in the world*, Helsinki, Kirjayhtymä, 1985, p. 93.)

6) M. Koivisto (translated by K. Törnudd), *Witness to History: The Memoirs of Mauno Koivisto, President of Finland 1982-1994*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1997, p. 20.

7) J. Suomi, *Pysähtyneisyyden vuodet: Mauno Koiviston aika 1981-1984*, Keuruu, Otavan Kirjapaino Oy, 2005, s. 269.

caution. Actually Koivisto felt unpleasant about Rogers's statement and wrote in memoirs: "The situation became unpleasant in the extreme...we could be expected to endorse in public the view that a Soviet invasion of Sweden and Norway through Finnish territory was possible. We were well aware of the Soviet sensitivity over these matters"⁸⁾.

Koivisto remained without any response about the statement even stubbornly not only because he sought to calm down the situation in order not to irritate the Soviet Union unnecessarily, but because he tried to show his determined attitude not to make an excuse or pay lip service to America and the Soviet Union. Here we can well observe Koivisto's independent attitude behind his low profile appearance. Thereafter, Koivisto sought to build close individual relationship with the leaders of the Soviet Union to stabilize Finnish-Soviet relation. At the same time, he attempted to gain more room for maneuver in equalizing relation with the Soviet Union.

1-2) American suspicion about credibility of Finnish neutrality: A critical statement by Kalevi Sorsa toward American foreign policies

On April 30, 1985, prime minister Kalevi Sorsa, who was also party leader of the Social Democratic Party, delivered a speech to a May Day-eve at the Käpylä Worker's House in Helsinki. In the speech, he sharply criticized United States policy in Nicaragua and attacked President Regan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Furthermore, there was nothing critical statement about the Soviet Union which was at that time mired down in its war on Afghanistan, and Sorsa even praised Gorbachev's moratorium proposal on Euro-missiles⁹⁾, which got

8) Koivisto (1997), *op.cit.*, p. 21.

9) There are two reasons why Sorsa made such an unusual U.S. criticism in his speech. One is that as a then chairman of disarmament committee of Socialist International, Sorsa often felt frustrated when he observed other influential members of SI sharply criticizing U.S. policy whereas Sorsa was constrained by Finland's foreign policy from speaking out, at least officially. It is speculated that Sorsa and his party advisers at times felt they were lagging behind their SI peer group on such issues. The other one is related to the Soviet factor in Finnish domestic politics. Sorsa had definite presidential ambitions following President Koivisto's second term, so he needed to gain a good reputation from Moscow. (J. F. Cooper, *On The Finland Watch: An American Diplomat in Finland During the Cold War*, 1stBooks Library, 2001, pp. 252-253.)

American officials surprised and irritated. According to James Ford Cooper, then U. S. deputy ambassador in Finland, this Sorsa's statement was regarded as "inappropriate and unbalanced"¹⁰⁾ by U.S. embassy, and they reported this to the government with Embassy telegram "Helsinki 0195" of May 3, 1985, which was classified "confidential" as follows:

...we must ask ourselves we are increasingly seeing a pattern in which the Government of Finland is taking selective positions on matters at controversy or under active negotiation between the U.S. and Soviet Union, positions that are critical of U.S. positions and in praise of Soviet Union positions that are known to be unacceptable to the U.S. We fully recognize every country's right to express its own views and we welcome honest and objective criticisms and advice which we receive from time to time from all quarters, including from our allies. But what are we to conclude when criticism is public and seems to go only in one direction and when our best efforts to explain our positions are ignored? These questions are disturbing to the embassy¹¹⁾.

U.S. protest against Sorsa's statement emphasized that "they [the Finns] could not maintain a credible policy of neutrality while criticizing United States policies and being silent on Soviet transgressions"¹²⁾. For Koivisto's part, however, he didn't take his stance on Sorsa's statement, telling on TV interview that "the episode had perhaps been blown out of portion" and that "had the embassy not called attention to it few people would have perhaps noted press reports of the prime minister's speech"¹³⁾. He went on to note that "it is important that there be no question about Finland's neutral policy of maintaining good relations in all directions"¹⁴⁾. Here, too, Koivisto showed reserved reaction in order not to make the issue bigger in public and not to make the Soviet Union

10) *Ibid.*, p. 246.

11) *Ibid.*, pp. 247-248.

12) *Ibid.*, p. 254.

13) *Ibid.*, p. 250.

14) *Ibid.*

have unnecessary suspicion about Finland's neutral stance.

2) Low profile shift of foreign policy: From “neutrality” to “good neighborliness”

As the superpower-relations got aggravated and international tension heightened, Koivisto regarded that Finnish policy of neutrality became an unstable factor, which might be at target of maneuvering between East and West blocs. Therefore, he proposed a cautious but important change in foreign policy, that is, the shift of stress from “neutrality” to “good neighborliness (naaprisovunpolitiikka)”¹⁵⁾.

On 22 September 1983, at Koivisto's invitation cabinet foreign affairs committee met, and Koivisto gave his view about his forthcoming visit to the United States and the United Nations. He pointed out no agreements were in sight, but Finland would have to take stands¹⁶⁾. Defining Finland's situation, Koivisto stated that while the Soviet Union had been reluctant to recognize Finland as a neutral country since the end of 60s, the Western countries did so although Finland had the YYA treaty with the Soviet Union. Then he asked: “There was every reason to ask whether the Western countries would have been particularly eager to recognize Finnish neutrality if the Soviet Union had done so. Or were they trying to support Finland in a difficult situation?”¹⁷⁾

From 60's to 70's Kekkonen gained recognition to Finland's policy of neutrality from major Western countries, but Koivisto considered this recognition was given just in order to keep Finland out of Eastern bloc, and the Western countries did not trust Finnish neutral position authentically. Thus, he made a proposal to define Finnish foreign policy as primarily one of good neighborliness instead of neutrality, and this wording must be used thereafter¹⁸⁾. He also added that “[f]rom now on, our course would be to emphasize our resolve to maintain good relations with our neighbours above all but also with every other state in the world”¹⁹⁾.

15) M. Koivisto, *Historian Tekijät: Kaksi Kautta II*, Helsinki, Kirjayhtymä, 1995, s. 101.

16) Koivisto (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 37.

17) *Ibid.*

18) *Ibid.*

19) *Ibid.*, p. 38.

The aim of shifting importance of foreign policy from “neutrality” to “good neighborliness” was to consolidate Finnish position under the difficult situation at the beginning of 80s.

Besides this, in May 1985, Sorsa IV government made a slight change of wording in foreign policy part of their government program. This change was conducted in order to widen a distance from the Soviet Union and to reinforce Finnish identity as a member of Nordic backed by the stable situation between the Soviet Union and Nordic countries. The change of wording occurred as follows:

(The wording of the former government)

The government follows Paasikivi-Kekkonen line and active peace-seeking neutral policy based on the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. In particular, the government develops mutual beneficial neighbor relation with the Soviet Union. Relationship with Nordic countries and cooperation with them is also to be developed. The government maintains good relations with all countries²⁰⁾.

(The wording of Sorsa IV government)

In international relations the government continues to conduct policies for Finnish nation's basic interests consolidated under President J.K. Paasikivi's and Urho Kekkonen's leadership. The government develops confidential and mutually beneficial neighbor relation with the Soviet Union based on the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance.

Traditional cooperation with Nordic countries is to continue to be developed in other fields, too. The government continues to act to keep Nordic area out of international tension. The government conducts neutral policy seeking to reinforce peace, and maintains friendly relations all countries and advances constructive international cooperation²¹⁾.

20) Official site of Finnish Government.

(<http://valtioneuvosto.fi/tietoa-valtioneuvostosta/hallitukset/hallitusohjelmat/vanhat/sorsaIII/fi.jsp>)

21) *Ibid.*

(<http://valtioneuvosto.fi/tietoa-valtioneuvostosta/hallitukset/hallitusohjelmat/vanhat/>)

In government program of Sorsa III 1982, it can be observed that FCMA treaty with the Soviet Union has a primal importance and under the good neighbor relations, relations with Nordic countries and other countries have seemingly only second importance. However, in government program of Sorsa IV 1983, "Paasikivi-Kekkonen line" and "Finnish nation's basic interest" are placed as the basis of foreign policy and FCMA treaty is only related to the relation with the Soviet Union. Moreover, wording of relation with Nordic countries also changed. In the former program, it was dealt so briefly just after the reference to the Soviet Union, but in the new government program, the emphasis on Nordic countries apparently increased, and it was dealt in another paragraph, ranging over two sentences. This can be considered that now that Nordic factor have more importance for Finland almost as much as relation with the the Soviet Union.

Koivisto explained this change in the government program in his memoir; "Clear change was that, whereas FCMA treaty had placed as whole Finnish foreign policy's basis earlier, now the treaty was just equal element of foreign policy, such as Nordic cooperation and neutral policy"²²⁾.

There was in fact some suspicion and irritation expressed from the Soviet side regarding this change of wording, worrying this actually meant the change of Finnish foreign policy in practice. Koivisto, however succeeded to persuade Andropov that it did not mean at all the change of Finnish foreign policy in essence but it was only a change in expression. Here we can assume that relationship of trust had been established between Koivisto and Andropov and Finnish-Soviet relation stabilized enough even during the New Cold War. This was one of firm foundations which Koivisto could rely on when he endeavored to work as invisible mediator between the U.S. and the Soviet Union after the rise of Gorbachev.

3) Koivisto's bridge-building policy: Role of messenger and forum-setting

As America-Soviet relation worsened and disarmament negotiation reached

sorsaIV/fi.jsp)

22) M. Koivisto, *Historian Tekijät: Kaksi Kautta II*, Helsinki, Kirjayhtymä, 1995, s. 78.

deadlock, both sides asked Finland to play a role as an intermediary to effect a breakthrough in the situation. Yet for Finland, this was quite difficult request, for there would be a risk of sacrificing Finland's impartiality as a neutral state if Finland would take one side's request carelessly, then the other side might regard it as a sign of supporting their counterpart. In such a situation, Koivisto took a request but only as a messenger, exchanging both side's views without making public to save both faces and trying to create atmosphere of trust between superpowers. Koivisto never tried to draw a blue print of agreement, but continued to offer himself and Finnish office as a channel of communication even when one found it difficult to see any bright prospect of advancement. He explained this style of bridge-building in his memoir:

Usually the best results are reached when the first aim has been to build confidence and create an atmosphere of trust, when public polemic has been avoided and parties have sought to find what they have in common. The best achievements of Finland's foreign policy have resulted from quiet and patient work. We shall continue to work in this manner. That is how we can best advance the cause of peace and international understanding in the world²³⁾.

Finland obtained credentials as an intermediary through the success of this quiet but energetic bridge-building policy pursued by Koivisto. It can be valued that this achievement would build a foundation of Finnish policy of mediation (e.g. Kosovo War) conducted and developed by the next President, Martti Ahtisaari in the post-Cold War era.

4. Conclusion

The reason why Koivisto was able to maintain the "low profile" in drastically changing international situation is because stable relation between Finland and the Soviet Union was already established as a big achievement of "Paasikivi-

23) Koivisto (1997), *op.cit.*, p. 49.

Kekkonen line” and cooperative relation between Koivisto and the government enabled to operate state affairs smoothly. For Koivisto, being “low profile” was one of political tactics, and he once described this as follows. “If you are being provoked, it’s best to try not to get provoked”²⁴⁾. By conducting this strategic low profile foreign policy, Koivisto made prompt and resolute decisions to react to rapidly fluctuating situation in the Soviet Union and Europe.

At the same time, he made efforts, quietly but consistently, to serve as a messenger and provider of channel for an exchange of views of the U. S. and the Soviet Union. Contrary to Kekkonen’s visible initiatives, Koivisto’s activities were mostly invisible ones. However, this doesn’t mean that they were only passive and subject to other countries or international environment. Rather, it can be evaluated that Koivisto conducted invisible active foreign policy in accordance with Finnish national interests and contributed to relaxation of international tension, which eventually led to end of the Cold War.

24) Häikiö, Pesonen, *op. cit.*, p. 27.