Towards Symmetric Defence, 1982–89

The 1980s have in many ways been the culmination of Finland’s foreign policy efforts in the post-war era. In the economic and political realms Finland has continued to integrate itself into the West via several organisations. Its relations with the Soviet Union have been deprived of most of their secrecy and duplicity. In domestic debate constraints have been removed and free discussion of all aspects of the Finnish post-war experience has ensued. In military defence policy, developments have been equally conspicuous. Finland has built a modern defence force which through its doctrine, force structure and deployment of forces signals Finland’s resolve to defend against both East and West.

The speed at which Finland has moved from a secretive defence policy to the promotion of open discussion of defence questions has been phenomenal. At the beginning of the 1980s there were no current works available on Finland’s defence policy. Nor was there any willingness on the part of the Finnish authorities to promote such studies. By the end of the decade there were several academic works available on Finland’s defence policy and defence issues were routinely discussed in the press and in academic journals. While the surge of academic writings can be attributed to the aggressiveness of a handful of researchers, the free debate on defence questions must be seen as a consequence of a general liberalisation of domestic atmosphere following the end of Kekkonen’s presidency. More significantly, free debate in Finland on questions of defence and foreign policy has been a result of the Gorbachev era in the Soviet Union.

1 THE POST-KEKKONEN ERA

President Kekkonen resigned for reasons of health in October 1981. His last years in power were an unfitting ending to the career of statesman who had with his unending willpower and determination led Finland through various trials and crises. Towards the end of his career it became abundantly clear that he should have retired already in the 1970s. Yet this had been impossible for two reasons. First, Kekkonen himself was unwilling to retire. Exercising power had become a way of
life for him and he simply could not see the country surviving without his guidance. Second, Finnish political parties contributed to the prolongation of Kekkonen’s career. Since there was no clear successor to Kekkonen the major parties wanted to buy time for their own candidates to strengthen their position before embarking on an election battle. This was done by asking Kekkonen to stay in office. The fact that Kekkonen’s retirement was bound to lead to a total reconsideration of Finland’s political future increased the unwillingness of the main parties to let Kekkonen retire.

It is not clear how long Kekkonen was incapable of functioning as a head of state. Some accounts record difficulties in Kekkonen’s concentration from the early 1970s onward. At any event, the media coverage of his visit to Iceland in 1981 revealed that his age had become a hindrance to his work. After a stroke in October he asked to be relieved of his duties. Prime Minister Mauno Koivisto was nominated to the position of acting president. In the presidential elections of January 1982 Koivisto was elected President and has since then been the head of state.

Mauno Koivisto’s early years in office were characterised by two pursuits: a conspicuous attempt to safeguard Kekkonen’s legacy (without being overshadowed by his memory) and a concerted effort to guarantee the continuation of good relations with Brezhnev’s Soviet Union. These two aspects were discernible in most of Koivisto’s statements as acting president and during his first term in office. In December 1981 Koivisto used poll results to convince an audience in Stockholm that the Finnish people supported the foreign policy pursued by Kekkonen and Paasikivi. In his televised New Year speech on 1 January 1982, when he was still only acting president, Koivisto stated that Finland would be unwavering in its commitment to the foreign policy of his predecessors. In the Inauguration Speech on 27 January 1982 he declared that his most central task was to continue the line of Paasikivi and Kekkonen in Finland’s foreign policy. This alone could guarantee the achievement of the most important goal: ‘that the good neighbourliness with the Soviet Union based on the FCMA Treaty continuously grows stronger’. His commitment to good relations with the eastern neighbour was revealed in that he predictably made his first state visit to the Soviet Union.

Koivisto’s thesis that nothing will change in Finland’s foreign policy was not accepted by all. Certain academics saw the end of the Kekkonen era as a perfect occasion to review and reconsider Finland’s foreign policy. Professor Dag Anckar from Åbo Akademi was the most controversial of these. In a speech at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs he suggested that the FCMA Treaty was not the best guarantee for Finland’s security. Instead, Finland’s security interests would be served