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The “War on Terror” and Non-alignment

Andrew Newby and Gavan Titley

Against such an enemy, there can be no neutrality.
—President George W. Bush, March 11, 2002

Two European Union countries—Ireland and Finland—could never be called “enemies” of America. Nevertheless, they remain, for historical and pragmatic reasons, outside any formal military alliances. Because of this non-alignment, they have been pressured since 9/11 to state exactly where they stand in relation to the U.S. and its “War on Terror.” Both are members of NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative, and their positions are closer to what James Skelly has described as “impartial” rather than isolationist neutrality.

Finnish soldiers have served with distinction in peace-keeping operations and their diplomats have been seen as honest brokers in Yugoslavia and Northern Ireland. Irish soldiers have helped to keep the fragile peace in Lebanon and East Timor, and Ireland has provided the UN with major figures such as Mary Robinson and Dennis Halliday. The importance the citizens of these countries has given to the role of the UN in world affairs was amply illustrated in the anti-war demonstrations of early 2003, when the light-blue flags of the UN were much in evidence in Helsinki and Dublin.

Some parties claim that non-alignment remains so popular with the Finnish and Irish people because they fail to understand contemporary geopolitics. Yet, it is more than coincidence that both countries witnessed at close hand some of the hypocrisy at work in the War on Terror. Finland borders Russia, whose government has used much of the Bush rhetoric to justify a mutually destructive campaign in Chechnya. The Irish, similarly, have observed for decades the way the British government has conducted a “dirty war” in Northern Ireland. With this experience comes a realization that terror, whatever form it takes, can seldom be beaten by violence. By contrast, and perhaps by necessity, the governments of these countries have obfuscated the issue in order to be all things to all people. The high-wire act that both have performed in order to convince their electorates that their non-aligned status is intact, and yet at the same time keep in Bush’s good books, has produced great elasticity in definitions of neutrality.

While the question of Finland becoming a full member of NATO is far from new, alliance supporters quickly took advantage of 9/11 and the military adventures it precipitated in order to press their case. The accession of Finland’s

Baltic neighbors to NATO has added to this impetus, and the disconnection between the citizenry and its government is highlighted by polls from early 2003, which put opposition to NATO at 80 percent, and yet at the same time showed that 70 percent of Finns accepted that membership was, in any case, inevitable. The Finnish government has repeatedly denied any such inevitability, and the public's impression illustrates just how much the small minority of NATO supporters have been allowed to set the media agenda.

With the world awaiting the U.S. attack on Iraq, December 2002 saw the then Finnish Prime Minister, Paavo Lipponen, meet the American President in Washington, DC. Bush claimed that while he respected Finland's non-alignment, the door was open for them to join NATO at any time. The same line was taken by NATO Secretary General George Robertson on a visit to Helsinki one month later. Certainly, those with an interest in expanding NATO are too smart to alienate Finnish public opinion even further by making direct demands that Finland should join the alliance. Rather, the brief non-committal remarks by Bush and Robertson allow them to keep the issue simmering gently, while their work is done, ever so subtly, within Finland itself.

Here, we find a self-appointed elite using a variety of methods to erode Finnish non-alignment, trying as much as possible to bypass the electorate. This cabal breaks down into roughly three groups: the military, a handful of foreign diplomatic missions in Helsinki, and small sections of influential media organizations.

If Finland joins NATO in the foreseeable future it will certainly be against the wishes of the majority of the population. Normal notions of democracy, however, can be easily bypassed, which is why military mandarins and fading former diplomats or politicians have been left to promote the NATO cause. In December 2002, an article in the influential *Helsingin Sanomat* newspaper clearly illustrated the insidious nature of the ongoing NATO campaign. It argued that a program of education should be started among the Finnish people to make them tolerant of NATO. First, the argument ran, the "elite" must be convinced, and then teaching the plebs could begin.

Former UK ambassador Alyson Bailes pursued a similar line during her time in Finland, and boasted recently that, among the Nordic countries, it was "no coincidence that Finland is having the most open and energetic debate ... about a basic policy change, i.e. joining NATO." This is at once misleading and extremely instructive. The lively and open debate is entirely mythical, with a semi-covert campaign in favor of Finnish NATO membership being carried out among this "elite" via spin in newspapers and TV. The main approach, as propounded by NATO spokespeople such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Finland's former NATO ambassador Leif Blomqvist, is a gradualist one, a belief that Finland's drift towards NATO is as inevitable as was its accession to the EU in 1995.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization supporters have also tried to ingrain a sense of shame for what they describe as cowardly non-interventionism, or "neutralism"—presumably changing the ending of the word "neutrality" to "-ism" is to stigmatize the notion. A typical example was published in the *Yearbook of Finnish Foreign Policy 2003* by a Helsinki-based British researcher, Toby Archer. Here, we read that during NATO's Balkan bombing campaign,

insular Finnish people "put the sovereignty of Yugoslavia above the human rights of the Kosovars." Utterly absent is the kind of critical discourse that can be found in NATO countries themselves: of NATO's role in the ethnic cleansing of Serbia and Kosovo; the use of depleted uranium; the arming of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) (ironically, of course, known at the time to be part of the vague al-Qaeda network); the targeting of civilians; or the smart-bomb technology that flattened the Chinese Embassy and strayed into Bulgaria.

After quoting another *Helsingin Sanomat* op-ed piece, albeit one translated into English, Archer remarks that "this [Cold War] attitude is seen in the continuing support for Finland staying out of direct involvement in conflicts in the international arena, but is also visible in the insularity and times [*sic*] xenophobic nature of society domestically." This is at best intellectually lazy and at worst it is overt propaganda, again detached from the debates going on in NATO member states about the alliance's relevance in the "New World Order." The United States, it seems, is going to be far more content to lead loose "coalitions of the willing" than a formal, potentially truculent, alliance. Conversely, Germany and France are increasingly concerned with trying to develop a purely European alternative. Incidentally, it seems that around half of all Finns are willing to accept an EU defense force, a recent statistic that pours scorn on the "racist" or "insular" thesis put forward by Archer and his ilk.

Ireland's relatively recent introduction to NATO via PIP has prevented the issue of full membership from seeping into general political discourse. And yet, the two years that have passed since 9/11 have seen Irish non-alignment become one of the most fiercely debated political issues on the island. Despite the Fianna Fáil government's reluctance to discuss the conversion of Shannon airport into a staging post for the U.S. military, public debate in Ireland began to question both its constitutionality and its morality. While the government equivocated on neutrality, it was unambiguously aligned in praise lavished elsewhere. In a St. Patrick's Day address in Lowell, Massachusetts during his 2002 campaign for Congress, Marty Meehan noted that "Ireland has played a key role in the international coalition against terrorism. American military planes are landing and reloading at Irish airports." Earlier, in October 2001, the widow of a former U.S. ambassador to Ireland said that "It is unreasonable at the moment to say you are neutral. We are fighting terrorism and we are in this together; Ireland and the United States are as friends and family in this."

The presence of a large Irish diaspora in America has placed Ireland in a different position from Finland in terms of the direct influence of 9/11. It is believed that no Finn lost their life in the terror attacks, whereas we need only examine the names of the dead of the New York Fire Department to see a sizeable number of Irish and Irish-American victims. *Taoiseach* Bertie Ahern's offer of assistance to Bush was quickly accepted, and less than a fortnight after the attacks over 2,000 U.S. troops had already used Shannon as a transit point for Afghanistan.

Thus, although scarcely making an impression on the mainstream media, the Irish Green Party lamented that after a year of Fianna Fáil's collaboration in the "War on Terror" the national policy of neutrality was in "tatters." It was claimed

that “the Americans now treat Shannon as a domestic military airport. Soldiers in desert fatigues can be seen walking around the airport complex and will talk openly about their destination.” Recently, Shannon “warport” has become the focus of nationwide days of protest, and a peace camp has been established there both to focus the protest and to monitor military activity. Ploughshare actions against American military hardware have been taken on several occasions, leading to the deployment of the non-aligned Irish army to protect the Shannon perimeter and transiting U.S. forces against Irish citizens.

Criticism of the Irish government, claiming it has no control over or knowledge of what military personnel ferry with them through Shannon—thus contravening the Constitution—finally brought the matter into the open. Ahern, typically, backed off, claiming “I don’t think that’s very correct” that the Marines were armed in transit. Later, in explaining the elasticity of the Irish government’s impartiality, on the eve of the latest Gulf War, the *Taoiseach* argued that while Ireland had “made it clear that a second UN resolution” was needed to legalize the war, it was also recognized that “the U.S. and the UK believed they have a mandate from existing UN resolutions, to wage war on Iraq.”

The widespread opposition to ditching non-alignment in both Finland and Ireland has caused their respective governments to play a dangerous, even duplicitous, game with the U.S. With this in mind, maybe it is not surprising that interested parties have started referring to them as “former EU neutrals.” When Paavo Lipponen visited Washington in December 2002 he told Bush how much the Finnish people “appreciated his leadership,” which may have been nice for the President to hear, but was a patent untruth. Another, unspecified, comment from Lipponen led the U.S. to thank Finland for being a valuable member of the “Coalition of the Willing,” which it supposedly was not. Incredibly, the issue of where this non-aligned country stood in relation to the Iraq war dominated the spring 2003 general election campaign, and it seems that the constant badgering of Lipponen by Centre Party leader Anneli Jäätteenmäki contributed to the latter’s eventual victory. After only two months in power, Jäätteenmäki was forced to resign because the documents used against Lipponen had been classified. But this has overshadowed another important issue—what did Lipponen actually say to Bush on behalf of his citizens?

Lipponen’s actions typify the increasing disconnection in many countries between the people and the politicians they have chosen to represent them. Recent members of the “Coalition of the Willing,” such as Italy, Spain and—though to a lesser extent—Britain and Estonia, have all ridden roughshod over mass demonstrations of their citizens against the war in Iraq. Lipponen, especially since losing his position as prime minister, has criticized the Finnish people for their negative attitude toward the Americans. He has begun articulating the view commonly presented by opponents of non-alignment in the Finnish military and media: that Finns are afraid of confrontation because of deep-held hang-ups about Russia.

Such a viewpoint, while attempting to justify the gradual erosion of non-alignment, itself falls foul of the accusation of insularity, for it is only tenable if one ignores the situation elsewhere. The Finnish public’s opposition to Operation

Iraqi Freedom, for example, was mirrored in other countries of vastly divergent profiles, such as Argentina, Switzerland, Russia and Pakistan. To distil the argument down to a debilitating inferiority complex on the part of the Finnish people oversimplifies their strong attachment to non-alignment, but it is the mainstay of the gradualists' rhetoric. With the U.S. now a more important export market for Finland than Russia, Lipponen's promptings smack of economic opportunism rather than ideology.

Market forces, not morality, now drive the piecemeal compromising of non-alignment in Finland and Ireland. In its founding statement, the Project for a New American Century demanded increased cooperation with America's "democratic allies" to secure the U.S.'s position in the world. William Kristol has spoken of NATO expansion as a means of institutionalizing the "Coalition of the Willing." More recently, Robert Zoellick, Bush's trade-relations expert, described the need for the U.S. to cultivate a "coalition of liberalizers," explicitly linking alliance with trade.

The Irish government was prepared to court derision over Shannon not just out of nostalgic transatlanticism, but out of fear of being, to coin a phrase, "Yemenized." In voting against the resolution authorizing Bush, senior to attack Iraq in 1991, Yemen was regarded, in the words of one U.S. diplomat, to have uttered the most expensive "no" in history. Writing in the *Irish Times*, Bill McSweeney argued that Irish diplomacy during its recent stint on the UN Security Council was conducted with an awareness of the serious economic damage that would reward a lack of ethical pliability, or as he put it, for any "slow learner" in the Irish Foreign Ministry it was "enough to mention Intel, Microsoft, Dell, and what happened to Yemen in 1990, to decipher the code and press the point home."

McSweeney's emphasis on the centrality of inward investment into Ireland's software industry suggests ways that global economic interconnectedness can be used to advance unilateral political agendas, a point made all the more shabbily obvious by the overt politicization of aid and trade in the run-up to a proposed second resolution authorizing an attack on Iraq. Other evidence also suggests that this very industry in Ireland is compromising non-alignment through business as usual.

Investigations by Amnesty Ireland and the *Irish Examiner* newspaper have uncovered Irish companies exporting weapons components and, more recently, software crucial to the U.S. and French nuclear programs. Embarrassingly, some of the companies involved in this have been grant aided by the Investment and Development Agency (IDA), and potential pleas of government ignorance jar with a 500 percent increase in military licenses issued by the Department of Enterprise and Employment over the last five years.

Similarly, it is no coincidence that in Finland the main civilian supporters of NATO have also been keen to liberalize the Finnish economy. The role of these people in agenda setting was questioned by Erkki Tuomioja, Finland's Foreign Minister, who stated that "the proponents of neo-liberalism in Finland are not really so active or prominent in politics as in the media or in some academic circles." The same point can be made for NATO, and the two issues are explicitly connected in Toby Archer's article. Archer seeks to impute racist motives for the reluctance of the "insular" Finnish people to engage in NATO

or U.S.-led campaigns, and links economic liberalism to vague security issues, claiming that “the social democratic model, supported by ... high tax rates, that exists in Finland may also add to this insularity.”

Direct U.S. investment in Finland is less obvious than in Ireland, and the links between economics and alignment have not, as yet, been widely examined. The fact remains, however, that a handful of multinationals play a vital role in Finnish business life, and the boards of these companies are not likely to be impressed by a government that antagonizes its most important customers. Nokia, for example, the greatest symbol of the Finnish high-tech success story, has spent a great deal of time, energy and money in achieving its pre-eminence over Motorola in what is its single largest market—the U.S.. Pulp and paper giants such as UPM Kymmene and Stora Enso, likewise, have significant business interests in the U.S. Conversely, many U.S. companies have used Finland as an entrepôt to the “newly liberalized” Russian market. If equivocation over the War on Terror began to cloud trade relations, positioning Finland in Donald Rumsfeld’s “Old Europe,” these companies could easily move across the Baltic to Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania, all new NATO members and all firmly established, at least in their governments’ minds, in “New Europe.”

Just as some Irish-based companies benefit from military activity, the Finnish munitions company Patria, partly state owned, continued to supply grenade launchers to the American army in 2003, despite a directive that Finland is not supposed to arm countries at war. Apparently this rule can be easily subverted. In a piece of logic Bertie Ahern would have admired, Patria claimed that the order was taken before America attacked Iraq and, apparently, the launchers were not to be ready until after the war ended. Not only does this display moral elasticity, it seems that Finnish defense sources know more about the campaign in the Gulf than the U.S.’s own generals, who had little notion of its duration at the time of Patria’s announcement.

The obvious economic threats made towards France and Germany in regard to their recent support for the UN clearly resonate in smaller countries that trade with the U.S. But if the “War on Terror” is so transparently righteous, such blackmail would not be necessary. Bertie Ahern’s almost painful squirming was summed up thus in one Dublin newspaper: “regarding the Government’s stance on the Iraq war, Ahern could drop all the nonsense about UN resolutions and tell it like it really is: ‘We’re an irrelevant, tiny island on the periphery of Europe. We have no influence at all but we’d be screwed without U.S. investment and there’s no way we are going to jeopardize that.’” Like Finland, Ireland was thanked by George W. Bush for its help, and Ahern admitted to Parliament that he presumed the Americans did, in fact, include Ireland as part of their coalition.

On a recent visit to Ireland, Nelson Mandela defended the UN and criticized the Irish government for being afraid of the Bush administration. In short, the U.S. economy is not only backed up by the iron fist of the military, but also by diplomats whispering “Yemen” into the ears of trade ministers, eager to stress what might happen to a country’s economy if trade relations with the U.S. deteriorated. Few leaders have been as bold in speaking out on behalf of their people as New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Helen Clark. Despite losing out on U.S. trade to neighboring Australia, where leader John Howard has been a keen

ally of Bush, Clark maintains that “we have to be free as a sovereign country to make our own foreign policy.”

Neutrality in both Ireland and Finland is therefore being eroded by what we could call “zones of alignment”—Shannon airport and certain industrial parks act as internationalized spaces for personnel and materials at odds with the stated policy of the nation state that contains them. They are being de-neutralized in a patchwork fashion rather than through a seismic shift of alliance. Ireland, in particular, has been noted recently for its naturalized neo-liberalism, and both Shannon airport and the emerging arms trade have been defended as enlightened self-interest in a globalized economy dependent on U.S.-based transnationals and tourism. The globalized nature of terrorism’s logics and targets does not appear to dent the case for self-interest, whatever the broader ethical considerations.

Although the pressure and propaganda relating to NATO or, indeed, “the Coalition of the Willing” may intensify, the Finnish and Irish people still believe the world needs impartial countries more than the U.S. needs extra servants to carry out its foreign policy. There is, however, a growing gap between democracies and their representatives which, if not addressed, will rapidly make George W. Bush’s idea of a world simply consisting of “good” and “evil” a reality.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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