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FINLAND: GEORGIA CONFLICT SPURS DEBATE ON SECURITY AND NATO

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1. (C) SUMMARY. While the crisis in Georgia appears not to have changed public opinion about Finland's security, it has generated debate and discussion about security policy. The consensus-based coalition government's policy on maintaining the "option" to join NATO remains, though the consensus appears stretched. President Halonen has stated that the crisis will not affect the basic direction of Finland's security policy, which she sees as not including NATO membership. Similarly, Prime Minister Vanhanen has stated that Russia's actions do not warrant an increase in defense spending or consideration of NATO membership at this time. However, Foreign Minister Stubb, well known for his Atlanticist leanings and enjoying popularity from his well-regarded chairmanship of the OSCE, created a stir by expressing his support for NATO membership in a speech to Finnish Ambassadors. More recently Stubb has denied any shift in government policy and maintained that NATO remains an option. Stubb's party, which holds the Foreign Affairs and Defense portfolios, may well stretch the consensus on

security and foreign policy, perhaps resulting in actions in line with our own policies, e.g., greater engagement in Afghanistan. However, given the constitutional division of foreign policy between President and Cabinet, NATO membership remains an option to be activated, if at all, after President Halonen's term. END SUMMARY.

Opinion Poll: Georgia Conflict Will Not Affect Security

2. (SBU) According to an opinion poll taken in the second week of the conflict, sixty percent of Finns polled believe that the conflict would not affect the security situation in Finland. One-third felt that the country's security had been adversely impacted. Thirty-eight percent blamed Russia for the conflict, while only ten percent blamed Georgia (28 percent blamed both equally, with the rest undecided). In a September 3 meeting with Embassy officials, several Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials speculated about the poll results. They asserted that most Finns are unfamiliar with Georgia - its people, its location - so the conflict was too distant to impact their security. The officials noted that Finns might become more concerned about their security situation should something similar happen in Ukraine, given their greater familiarity from student exchanges and the presence of Ukrainian workers in Finland.

Conflict generates debate on security and NATO

3. (C) While the poll did not reflect the latest public attitudes towards NATO, Finnish officials have inserted NATO into the public sphere since the crisis began. References to NATO have sprung more often from the National Coalition Party (NCP), the center-right government coalition member that favors NATO membership, leaving the other parties to respond or ignore. Foreign Minister Stubb (NCP) made his support for NATO membership well known in an August 25 speech to Finnish Heads of Foreign Missions. Stubb spoke very favorably of NATO and said there was "reason for closer cooperation," e.g., participation in the NATO Response Force (NRF), though he added that it was not yet time for a decision on the NRF. President Halonen also spoke to the diplomatic corps. Though her speech covered Finland's defense, including the need for Finland to maintain its own defense and to promote security through international organizations, she made no mention of NATO. She previously said that the crisis would not affect the government's current quadrennial security review (report due in the fall). On September 1 Vanhanen (Center Party) said publicly that Russia's actions did not merit raising Finland's defense spending or taking full NATO membership into serious consideration.

4. (C) On September 8, visiting Ambassador Schulte asked a

small group of Finnish officials whether Finland would be a NATO member in ten years. Vanhanen's Chief of Staff Risto Volanen declined to answer directly, stating that it was in Finland's "natural national interest" to cooperate with the U.S. on security. Volanen, managing to avoid even uttering the term "NATO," stated that it remains a "serious security option" for Finland. He added that Vanhanen's references to membership as an "option" intentionally strikes a middle ground from which he can criticize others in the government (or in the opposition) who swing too far towards or away from the question of membership. Unlike Volanen, MFA State Secretary Teija Tiilikainen was unhesitating in stating that Finland would be a NATO member. She criticized as "old thinking" the view (described by Volanen) that Finns should "keep their head down" so as not to anger their Russian

neighbor. Tiilikainen believes that, with a generation having grown up without seeing NATO as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, Finns will eventually decide to join the alliance, and much sooner than 10 years.

5. (SBU) A poll taken in mid-September by Suomen Gallup for the leading paper Helsingin Sanomat showed greater uncertainty amongst Finns on the question of NATO membership from last year. One in five Finns are unsure whether Finland should join, up from 16 percent last year and 11 percent 18 months ago. The rise in uncertainty comes at the expense of both the "NATO-yes" and "NATO-no" groups. The poll indicates that a majority still opposes membership, while over 20 percent are in favor. Support for membership within the NCP has dropped from a majority to 50 percent, with the number of those uncertain doubling from ten to twenty percent.

Opposition leader drawn into security, NATO discussion

6. (SBU) Jutta Urpilainen, head of the opposition Social Democrats, publicly stated that neither ties to NATO nor the basics of Finland's security policy need to be reviewed following the events in Georgia. She reportedly expressed a willingness to forego a future referendum on NATO membership, stating the next parliamentary elections could be a replacement. (COMMENT: Urpilainen may simply be attempting to push the matter beyond the October municipal elections. She has said little on security since assuming leadership in June, and only addressed the subject of security policy over three weeks after the crisis in Georgia started. END COMMENT.)

7. (C) Urpilainen also stated that Finland's non-aligned stance must follow the majority of the public. Such a position appears at odds with history and political reality in Finland, where public opinion often follows government policy and action. At a September 3 meeting with MFA

officials, several noted that public opinion is currently largely against NATO membership. They pointed to the example of Finland's EU accession, saying that the public did not support EU membership until the government undertook a public campaign in support of accession. In the same way they saw the public eventually supporting NATO membership, but only after the government arrived at a consensus in favor. They agreed that many in the government support NATO membership, but said that none are willing to publicly challenge the consensus policy on maintaining the NATO option.

Conflict Highlights Policy Differences Within Coalition

8. (C) While not openly challenging the current security policy, Stubb seems to be testing the consensus. His August 25 speech to the diplomatic corps caused a stir within the government and in the media. That speech described a "comeback" of "nation-states and power politics," and warned of the challenge to international institutions from single, obstructionist states (e.g., within OSCE and the UN Security Council) and from a possible confrontation between Russia and the West. Stubb senior advisor Jori Arvonon told PolChief that the speech - which also called for an "intensified" Finnish foreign policy that does not withdraw into empty statements and is freed from "phobias, handicapped attitudes and old illusions" - reflected the NCP's view of where Finnish foreign policy should go, and was crafted knowing the reaction it could provoke.

9. (SBU) The media picked up on Stubb's support for NATO. On August 31 the Prime Minister, in a radio interview program, dismissed Stubb's comments as reflecting his party's position, but also obliquely chided Stubb for stating NCP views to a gathering of Ambassadors. One editorial asserted that Finns have only a vague impression about how the country's foreign policy is run, and by whom, and that Stubb has compounded the confusion by speaking simultaneously as the Foreign Minister, OSCE Chairman and private citizen. During Parliamentary debate on September 10, members of opposition parties questioned whether the government still had a common position on security. In addressing the Parliament, Stubb drew directly from his August 25 speech to deny that his comments called into question the government's consensus view, and reiterated that Finland still has the NATO option.

10. (C) COMMENT. While Vanhanen states publicly that the consensus on security policy is firm, that consensus is being stretched. The NCP would like to capitalize on this debate, for even though the government has a strong influence over public opinion on the question of NATO membership, the NCP

needs more public support in order to head the next

government that would take Finland into NATO. Under the constitution foreign policy is divided between the Presidency and the Cabinet, and Halonen has said Finland will not join NATO on her watch. So, while the NCP may succeed in stretching the consensus, with results in line with U.S. interests - e.g., Stubb's public call on September 13 for "strengthening" Finland's role in Afghanistan - the question of NATO membership still lies beyond the next presidential election. END COMMENT.

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