**Protection of Western liberal democracies**

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The highly respected American philosopher and thinker on political, social, and economic issues, Francis Fukuyama, 69, at Stanford University in the US, is a neo-liberal, yet, he is quite leftist on economic issues and centrist, even towards the right, on social issues. He became famous when he in 1989 wrote his essay entitled ‘The End of History?’ where he argued that since it was a time of the end of communism and ideological struggle, the Western liberal democracy (and capitalist economic model) was what was left, more or less, as the final form of government and rule. His essay came just before the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, and he expanded the essay into a book in 1992. His books, including a new one released last week, are important for current political debates, including regarding NATO. The ‘New York Times International Edition’, a supplement to ‘Express Tribune in Pakistan, discussed some of the issues in an article on 16 May 2022.
About the Western liberal democracy and political culture, Fukuyama has noted that there has been ultra-conservative objection to it, indeed by populist politicians like former USA President Donald Trump. However, he doesn’t think rival ideologies are real treats to the liberal values; rather, he says, it is the ‘absolutized’ versions of the liberal principles that can threaten liberalism and all the Western ways. In liberal societies, which also Fukuyama supports, it is believed that their ways are the best and ultimate and that those who oppose liberal societies are not only wrong but even stupid.
That kind of complacency, yes, arrogance, is a contradiction to liberalism and the multicultural world we live in. We may well shout the word ‘eureka’, meaning ‘we have found it’, as the ancient Greek scholar Archimedes did, when he had discovered ‘Archimedes’ Law’. We may use it in joy and happiness at new and better discoveries and inventions, yet also hiding the many things we have not solved, such as implementing fairer economic systems benefitting all people, and indeed new ways of solving conflicts without violence and wars, so important in our time when the Russian War in Ukraine rages. We must never think that what we have already found is final; we must always keep searching for better and alternative ways – even in the Western liberal democracies.
Of course, there are situations when one side is entirely right and the other side is entirely wrong, on micro level, and on macro level, between countries, continents, and ideologies; moral and ethical issues are not always relative. Yet, clear cut situations are rare, so we must be open to discussions and adjustments of own positions, as should also our opponents be. The political cultures must refine own attitudes and develop better ways of listening and cooperating with friends and foes – also in the Western liberal democracies.
Overall, I agree with the Western values, as Fukuyama also does, but there is still reason to warn against righteousness and arrogance, even disrespect for the values of those we disagree with, forgetting, too, that maybe the opinions and stands of opponents are based on deeper and more honest convictions than our own. In the Western liberal democracies, and beyond, we must become much better at listening to each other and thinking ‘out of the box’. Fukuyama’s warnings must be taken seriously because it is about the future of liberalism and the West’s ways.
This more philosophical background can be used on contemporary political issues in Europe and the world, including the expansion of NATO, the world’s largest military alliance, or defence alliance, as it wants to be called, with thirty member countries in Europe and North America, and several other partners and aspiring partners – with huge arsenals of nuclear weapons, still engaged in military rearmament, which is not making the world safer.
This week, the parliaments in Finland and Sweden voted overwhelmingly for joining the alliance, and their membership applications were received by the NATO secretary General Jens Stoltenberg yesterday. It will take some months for all the members to ratify the applications, which must be made unanimously. Finland and Sweden are certainly likely to be accepted in, although there may be some discussions and ‘horse trading’, as Turkey has already voiced reservations; it is a NATO member, yet, it also cooperates closely with Russia.
The reason why the two non-aligned countries quite suddenly have decided to join NATO has to do with the fear they have of their big Russian neighbour, understood after Crimea was annexed by Russia in 2014, and realized more clearly after Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. It is understandable that the countries feel the need to join NATO, especially Finland due to its geographical location and long border with Russia. Yet, it is not unproblematic for them to join the huge, nuclear alliance.
For Sweden, it is a major u-turn, after the country has been outside the European wars for 200 years, and it has been a major international peace activist, both through NGOs and the government. Thus, Sweden gives up part of its soul and identity, and its national and international image. True, Sweden is also an arms manufacturer, but that is talked less about at home. Hopefully, the two countries will find new ways to continue important aspects of their peace activism, in close contact with the other Nordic countries and others. We should also consider that the current East-West ‘fronts’ are not built in stone and will not last forever. Where is the debate about pacifism and peaceful resistance to threats?
Finland and Sweden have always been Western-oriented, and their cooperation with NATO and USA has grown very close over the last decades. Experts say that Russia has realized this for a long time. By the way, Russia may also want to open a ‘Western window’, some day. The speed with which the NATO membership applications were prepared may in future lead to less trust in the politicians, especially in Sweden, where opinion polls indicate that only two-thirds are for membership, and that a majority of women are not for it.
We should again consider Fukuyama’s worry about the depth of the Western liberal democracies, and their ability to do what is right for themselves. They may not only be arrogant towards outsiders; they may also be righteous and arrogant against their own people. I believe the Swedish PM and Chair of the social Democratic Party, Magdalena Anderson, has made a political mistake not to include the public more when debating NATO membership. Whether it was done in good faith doesn’t make it less grave, maybe even more. The argument that Sweden had to join NATO at the same time as Finland was also carried too far; the matter was more urgent for Finland and the general public’s awareness there was already more mature. In Sweden, the urgency may have had much to do with the PM’s wish to get the matter out of the way before the parliamentary election in September this year. To have changed the values and identity of Sweden in just a few months will probably have a major backlash among people. It is a step away from the foundations of the Western liberal democracy. When this can happen in one of the world’s most advanced democracies, yet, also with a very technocratic civil service and mindset among people, it can also happen in other fields and countries. Fukuyama’s advice that the Western liberal democracies must be protected and renewed from within must be taken seriously.