

BOOK REVIEWS SECTION

Sia Spiliopoulou Akermark, Saila Heinikoski and Pirjo Kleemola-Juntunen (2018). *Demilitarisation and international law in context: The Åland Islands*. London: Routledge, 128 pp, ISBN: 978-1-138-09330-0. Price: £45.

A 19th century treaty on the demilitarisation of a small group of islands in the Baltic Sea may not appear, at face value, as a very promising *incipit* for an exciting academic text. *Demilitarisation and international law in context: The Åland Islands*, is a salutary reminder that *prima facie* judgments are often inaccurate. This brief study offers an examination of how demilitarisation has contributed to a peaceful resolution to a case of disputed sovereignty and reflects on the current legal and political challenges to this settlement. The overall objective of the book is: “to look at the demilitarisation and neutralisation of Åland as a long-standing regime intended to limit war” (p. 1). It is therefore relevant to numerous academic disciplines, including the international legal framework (of demilitarisation and neutrality); the international relations and political science framework of conflict resolution (intended to limit war); and the historical perspective which is adopted as a general progressive process through which the case-study is analysed.

The central thrust of the argument is that demilitarisation in the Åland Islands has served as a confidence building measure within a region with competing interests in the form of Sweden, Finland, Russia and other Baltic states. This argument is explored first by introducing the key terms which inform the theoretical framework within which the study is presented: militarisation, demilitarisation and securitisation. This is followed by a historical narrative of the legal status of the islands, from the 1856 Convention on the demilitarisation of the Åland Islands to the 1921 Convention on the Non-Fortification and Neutralisation of the Åland Islands and on to other developments after the end of the Second World War. The international legal dimension is dexterously woven with the political analysis relating to collective security. It is refreshing to see the authors perceptively analyse international legal norms in a political context while avoiding arid legalistic analysis.

The international legal dimension is investigated further in Chapter 3 in the context of international maritime law. Given the islands’ strategic position in the Baltic Sea, this is an important consideration with potentially competing interests in terms of the delineation of maritime jurisdiction and navigational rights. The relationship between the 1982 UN Law of the Sea Convention (a treaty with universal application) and the maritime law provisions of the 1921 Convention (a treaty with a very limited focus) is of special interest as a context in which to explore the effects of pre-existing treaty obligations contained in a localised treaty on newer provisions contained in treaties with a global reach.

Chapter 4 departs from the legal perspective and adopts a more explicit political analysis. The Åland Islands’ special status is examined from the perspective of regional and sub-regional security architecture, in the context of Finland’s neutrality and the evolving regional scenario from Cold War to post-Cold War contexts. Significant attention is paid to Finland’s EU membership and the consequent engagement with the EU’s evolving security and defence policy. While this chapter is interesting in its description of Finland’s approach to security at regional and sub-regional levels, it does not always succeed in maintaining the focus on the Åland Islands’ role in such an approach. Thus, the reader may, at times, struggle to identify the relevance of some of the lengthy considerations of regional and sub-regional security cooperation. This is indirectly acknowledged by the authors when they state that “the Åland

Islands play a minor role in security arrangements” (p. 75) since, as a subnational jurisdiction, they are only represented in the Nordic Council where the Islands are proactive. This chapter does however provide a thought-provoking argument that the very active interest in the Nordic Council by the Åland representatives is an indication of how autonomous participation in regional cooperation can serve to emphasise subnational and supranational perspectives as a counterbalance to national and statist ones.

The final chapter of the book provides concluding thoughts on the future of demilitarisation in international law. It highlights particularly the threats and challenges which technological advances present in this context, as well as the increasing tendency to blur civilian and military approaches.

All told, the study constitutes a very valuable addition to the literature on demilitarisation and on the Åland Islands themselves. It illustrates how international law provides several tools that, in the appropriate context, may serve to build confidence in divided communities, create the preconditions for peaceful resolution of conflict, and sustain peaceful coexistence and cooperation. However, an appreciation of the contextual elements (historical, ethnic, geopolitical, etc.) in any given situation is fundamental to the fulfilment of the promise which international law offers. After all, we do not need to be reminded that the Åland Islands have a very special status in legal terms; and possesses quite special characteristics. This specificity lies at the heart of the interest, but also the limitation, of this study. The appeal of this study to the practitioner of conflict resolution is perhaps more limited in the sense that the geopolitical circumstances and the legal and political status of the islands are probably unique. Having Sweden and Finland as the two major actors on the islands, yet being very much small states on their own terms, is an essential context. Both states share – and have shared for decades – an ambition to promote the rule of international law as a normative framework in international relations. They also share similar perspectives on such issues as good governance, human rights and respect for minorities. This confluence of interests and approaches provides a context which other disputed territories mostly lack. In any case, the rigorous analysis of this case study provides the academic community with a solid understanding of the mechanics of demilitarisation and of the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the legal framework which has ensured the Åland Islands’ continued peaceful existence.

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