

The World Since the Helsinki Final Act of 1975: A Legacy Disrespected?

By Ahti Tolvanen

Signed August 1st, 1975, by 35 nations including the United States, Canada, and nearly all European countries, The Helsinki Final Act was a landmark agreement aimed at reducing Cold War tensions and promoting cooperation across political, economic, and human rights domains. It enshrined principles such as sovereign equality, territorial integrity, the peaceful settlement of disputes and respect for human rights.

Braving a summer heatwave, I arrived at the meeting to honour the 50th anniversary of The Helsinki Final Act on July 31st accompanying Bruce Knotts, chairperson of the NGO Committee Disarmament, Peace and Human Rights, known to us as former director of the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office. As we took our places at Helsinki's Finlandia Hall we were invited by Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen on behalf of the Finnish Chairpersonship to consider a program without reference to the looming threat of another nuclear arms race as limiting treaties expire and scant reference to a mounting environmental crisis. Many countries that had signed in 1975 were now providing support to Ukraine fighting a Russian invasion and at the same time supporting Israel's genocide of Gazans.

Meanwhile aggressive threats such as by President Trump to annex Canada and Greenland seemed to be mainly ignored on the agenda. Humanity's existential climate and environmental crises received barely passing reference as billions are transferred to a massive environment-destroying military build-up. In fact these burning issues of the day might not have been mentioned at all were it not for the minority of carefully screened civil society attendees allowed in to join the over 1000 delegates.

Humanity's Expanding Biological Footprint

Since 1975, the global population has more than doubled, and with it, humanity's biological footprint has surged. Industrial agriculture, deforestation, and fossil fuel consumption have accelerated biodiversity loss and climate change. The ecological overshoot—where human demand exceeds Earth's regenerative capacity—has become a defining feature of the Anthropocene.

World GDP: Then, Now, and Ahead

- **1975 World GDP:** Estimated at around **\$5.5 trillion USD** (nominal).
- **2025 World GDP:** Surpasses **\$113 trillion USD**.
- **Projected 2055 GDP:** At a steady **2.5% annual growth**, global GDP could reach approximately **\$240 trillion USD** in 30 years, assuming compounding growth and relative stability.

This economic expansion has lifted billions out of poverty but also intensified resource extraction, emissions, and environmental deterioration.

NATO's Expansion and Contradictions

Since the Cold War's end which the 1975 Helsinki Accords signalled, NATO has expanded eastward, incorporating former Warsaw Pact members and Soviet republics such as Poland, Hungary, the Baltic states, and most recently Finland and Sweden. While framed as a stabilizing force, this expansion was viewed by Russia as a strategic threat, contributing to tensions that culminated in 2022 to its invasion of Ukraine.

NATO countries have largely condemned Russia's aggression and provided extensive military aid to Ukraine. Yet, many of these same nations have continued arms sales and diplomatic support for Israel during its military campaign in Gaza, which human rights organizations and international observers have described as genocidal in scale. This duality has sparked criticism over selective application of international law and human rights norms but little of that was heard July 31st in Helsinki.

The exception was a speech by Bruce Knotts at a lead-up event where he called for cutting off all arms trade with Israel as an absolute necessity to prevent a genocide of historic proportions. He pointed to historic examples of the failure of appeasement in the faces of ruthless military force.

Perhaps this was too hard to hear for many OSCE governments, including the Finnish hosts who continue arms deals with Israel and explain why Knotts was relegated to a lead-up gathering.

Military Spending and Emissions

NATO's collective military spending has surged dramatically in the past decade, driven by renewed great-power competition and regional conflicts. The alliance's defence budgets now exceed **\$1.3 trillion annually**, with the U.S. alone accounting for nearly half.

This militarization carries an environmental cost: **NATO's greenhouse gas emissions exceed those of over 50% of the world's nations**, according to independent climate assessments. Accompanying Knotts at the lead-up event, I was able to point this out, and that Military operations, supply chains, and infrastructure contribute significantly to global emissions, yet remain exempt from international climate treaties.

Nuclear Treaties and Strategic Instability

Key arms control agreements such as the **INF Treaty** and **New START** have either expired or been suspended, eroding decades of nuclear stability. The absence of binding treaties raises the spectre of a renewed arms race, with hypersonic weapons and AI-driven targeting systems adding complexity and risk. The risk of a devastating

and deadly nuclear winter from even a limited nuclear exchange was graphically set out by Kati Juva, co-chair of International Physicians for the prevention of Nuclear War who joined Bruce and me for the lead-up panel.

The Erosion of the Rules-Based Order

The **Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)**, born from the Helsinki Process, has struggled to assert its authority amid rising authoritarianism and geopolitical fragmentation. NATO, too, has faced internal contradictions—most notably during the Trump presidency, when threats to annex **Canada and Greenland** were floated, and alliance commitments were questioned.

These developments underscore a broader erosion of the **rules-based international order** envisioned in 1975. The principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, and peaceful dispute resolution have been repeatedly undermined by power politics and selective enforcement.

A Call to Reaffirm Helsinki

As the world confronts climate collapse, nuclear instability, and widening inequality, the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act offers a compass. Recommitting to its foundational principles—dialogue, cooperation, and respect for human rights—is not merely nostalgic. It is essential.

The decline of respect for democracy, not only in Russia but also the USA, Hungary, Turkey and beyond, should be a core OSCE concern which can hardly be addressed by leaving it off the agenda.

As the two main actors in bringing the Helsinki Conference together in 1975, Russia and the USA, were mainly on the sidelines July 31st, and stood out as violators of key Helsinki principles. There might have been an opportunity to speak truth to power and call both superpowers that fathered the act equally to account.

While acting as OSCE chair Finland and foreign minister Elina Valtonen seemed to only feel called upon to consider the violations of the peace by Russia. This was born out in her closing speech as well as remarks at a climate forum June 11th. While grave, Russia's actions are far from the only explanation for inadequate action (or complete denial in the case of the US administration) of the environmental crises- in which every state plays its own part.

Finland is also playing the Russian card as it leads the way in giving short shrift to fundamental human rights instruments such as the Geneva Refugee Convention, having totally closed its Eastern border and refusing entry to asylum seekers- the only country bordering Russia to have done so.

During a refreshment break a young Romanian UNHCR observer in Belarus described the austere and unsanitary conditions of prisons in which she worked with people who had been “pushed back” at the EU border for daring to seek asylum from authoritarian regimes.

Reviving the Helsinki Spirit demands courage: to confront contradictions, uphold universal norms, and prioritize diplomacy over domination. Canada was nowhere to be seen or heard on the July 31st agenda although corridor chats revealed we are still considered advocates for peace and human rights by Finns. One thinks Canada could have done more to shape these talks by working with the Finnish organisers.

The Helsinki vision remains unfinished, and the world is clearly a more dangerous place than 50 years ago—and the course of issue avoidance chosen by the current Chairpersonship is allowing the vision to slip further away.