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Avoiding parliamentary marginalization in foreign and security policy

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Foreign and security policy is commonly accepted to be a policy area dominated by the executive, with parliaments wielding at best limited influence. Yet the lack of empirical research beyond the very specific case of the U.S. Congress means that we do not really know whether and how European legislatures engage in foreign affairs. In this research note, PADEMIA member Tapio Raunio argues that members of parliament (MPs) nowadays have stronger incentives to become involved in foreign policy. Empirical evidence from Finland offers good cause for optimism, both regarding overall parliamentary scrutiny of foreign affairs and of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in particular.

Parliaments are easily sidelined from foreign and security policy decision-making – or at least that appears to be the ‘accepted wisdom’. [The literature suggests two explanations](#) for such executive dominance: either legislatures voluntarily acquiesce to such government-driven policy-making or they simply fail to control the cabinet in external relations.

According to the first perspective, parliaments delegate policy-making to the executive which represents the country abroad. The effective formulation and defence of national interest requires that the executive is given sufficient room for manoeuvre, and MPs themselves may share the belief that public criticism of the government might jeopardize the achievement of important foreign policy goals. This applies particularly to military or security matters where secrecy is often presented as integral to the advancement of national interests. Governments can also seek to avoid legislative constraints through framing issues as security threats – in line with what is termed ‘securitization’ in international relations literature. Indeed, a viable tradition in political theory holds that the role of legislature does and should stop at the

‘water’s edge’ where an area of executive privileges and responsibilities begin.



Many foreign policy issues have tangible distributional consequences for MPs’ constituencies



The second perspective, on the other hand, focuses on the real-life constraints MPs face in foreign affairs. Legislators cannot enjoy the same level of information about foreign affairs than members of the executive branch. Hence there is a persistent problem of informational asymmetry, with the structural two-level games logic of international bargaining further shielding cabinets from parliamentary control. And beyond such strategic considerations, global or regional governance is by its very nature intergovernmental, thus empowering governments at the expense of legislatures.

Stronger incentives for parliamentary engagement

But whether legislatures are indeed marginalized is really not known. With two notable exceptions, legislative-executive relations in the realm of foreign and security

policy have attracted remarkably little scholarly attention. One exception is the recent wave of studies on the parliamentary control of military missions that have emerged in the wake of the so-called Democratic Peace debate. The other exception is the vast number of studies on the U.S. Congress whose unparalleled power has made it impossible to ignore in any comprehensive analysis of American foreign policy. For almost every other democratic country, however, the study of legislative-executive relations in external relations short of the use of force is by and large uncharted territory.

Scholarly understanding of *how* legislatures become involved in foreign affairs remains also weak. This question may appear trivial or mundane, but there is a need to examine whether parliamentary politics in this field differs from domestic or EU policies, both regarding control mechanisms and party competition. The notions of 'executive dominance' and 'politics stopping at the water's edge' certainly point in the direction of less active control and casting aside public partisan differences in favour of providing domestic support for the government. And considering [the concerns about the democratic deficit in the CFSP](#) of the EU, it is also important to deepen our knowledge of how domestic legislatures engage in the EU's foreign policy and external relations.

MPs should also have stronger incentives for engaging in foreign policy. Growing levels of interdependence and globalization have internationalized an increasing range of issues previously decided nationally, such as immigration, trade, energy, and environment policies or human rights questions. Many of these policies have tangible distributional consequences for constituencies and can be more expensive than more diplomatic foreign policy issues. The changes in international system also facilitate broader interest and debate in foreign and security policy. Whether to enter 'wars of choice' or export arms to a

certain country are likely to be more contested decisions than during the Cold War. Moreover, higher levels of education and more varied sources of information have arguably brought about a comparably well-informed and interested public that pays more attention to international questions.

Lessons from Finland: cause for optimism

[My case study of the Finnish Eduskunta](#) offers cause for optimism. The Eduskunta is actively involved in foreign affairs, from contributing to 'grand strategy' documents to ministerial hearings in the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC). In fact, it might be better to talk about regular cooperation between the government and the Eduskunta, with the cabinet seeking *ex ante* support from FAC for its positions. Constitutionally regulated access to information is of great importance for the FAC, which has not only insisted on government fulfilling its reporting obligations but has also actively requested information from the cabinet. However, even with active parliamentary input, the information asymmetries in favour of the executive remain significant.



The Finnish case underscores the importance of establishing a culture of parliamentary involvement in foreign affairs



Overall, the agenda of the FAC is diverse and the Eduskunta essentially subjects the government to similar scrutiny in foreign policy as in other policy areas. FAC agendas are nonetheless dominated by EU and CFSP matters. Questions related to national security and defence, including crisis management, seem to be most salient, both in FAC and in the Eduskunta at large. This is quite understandable in light of Finland's geopolitical location and modern history. Regarding policy-making culture, the approach

is very consensual, both in the plenary and in FAC, but the meetings of the latter nonetheless feature quite active discussions that also see coalition partners keeping tabs on each other. The deliberate search for cross-party consensus in the name of national interest clearly does not facilitate plenary debates or public party competition over foreign policy.

The Finnish case underscores the importance of establishing a culture of parliamentary involvement in foreign affairs. Constitutional rights are obviously important, and the recent empowerment of the Eduskunta certainly provided the necessary legal framework for engaging in foreign policy. But at least equally significant is to design parliamentary

procedures that facilitate effective government scrutiny. The Foreign Affairs Committee is systematically involved in all types of foreign policy, receiving information from the government and hearing ministers ahead of EU or international meetings. Particularly the ministerial hearings have 'spilled over' from the parliamentary EU scrutiny system which is based on the 'mandating' of ministers in the Grand Committee (the EU committee). It is safe to conclude that the Eduskunta is undoubtedly one of the national parliaments with the strongest level of CFSP involvement.

This note represents the views of the author and not those of PADEMIA.



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