Cold War and the Environment: The Role of Finland in International Environmental Politics in the Baltic Sea Region

The Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area signed in 1974 in Helsinki is probably the most important environmental agreement consummated in the Baltic Sea region. This article is the first study that explores the history of this agreement, also known as the Helsinki Convention, by using primary archival sources. The principal sources are the archives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. We examine the role of Finland in the process that led to the signing of the Helsinki Convention from the perspective of international politics. The study focuses primarily on Finnish, Swedish, and Soviet state-level parties from the end of the 1950s to 1974. We show that Cold War politics affected in several ways negotiations and contents of the Helsinki Convention. We also argue that the Soviet Union used the emerging international environmental issues as a new tool of power politics.

INTRODUCTION

In Spring 1974, when the ice covering the Baltic Sea had not yet melted, the government representatives of the seven states around the Baltic Sea convened in Helsinki. at the initiative of the Finnish Government, to sign the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, also known as the Helsinki Convention (1). The objective of the Helsinki Convention was gradually to resolve the pollution problem affecting the Baltic Sea; concerns about the degradation of the marine environment were replaced by optimism about the future (2).

The Helsinki Convention qualifies as a unique achievement in its time. It was the first multilateral convention signed during the Cold War era by members of two mutually competing military alliances: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact. Of the seven signatories, three (the Soviet Union, Poland, and the German Democratic Republic [GDR]) were members of the Warsaw Pact, two (the Federal Republic of Germany [FRG] and Denmark) belonged to NATO, and Finland and Sweden were considered politically neutral. The Helsinki Convention was a general convention that covered all the pollutants known at the time and almost all of the sea area; as such, it was the first of its kind in the world (3, 4). The Helsinki Convention was later used as a model for other international environmental conventions, including the Convention for the Protection of the Mediterranean against Pollution (5, 6).

This article examines the process that led to the signing of the Helsinki Convention from the perspective of international politics. Our objective is to demonstrate that the convention not only aimed to protect the environment, but also had a political dimension that determined the framework for the drafting and the contents of the convention. We maintain that the political nature of the Helsinki Convention was an important motive for the participating countries and above all for Finland, which led the process.

COLD WAR, HISTORY, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The relationship between the Cold War and environmental politics has received attention also in the Baltic Sea region. Several researchers have argued that Cold War competition gradually translated into Baltic Sea cooperation (6–12). In this study we will examine this complex and contested process from the point of view of the Helsinki Convention.

Our study concentrates on the role of Finland in international environmental politics in the Baltic Sea region. The role of Finland in the Second World War and subsequently in Cold War Europe was unique. In the Second World War, Finland was one of only three European countries involved in the conflict that were not occupied by a foreign power (the others were the Soviet Union and Great Britain). As a result of the Second World War, Finland had to cede land to the Soviet Union, but it remained a sovereign state with a capitalist economy and a democratic social system. On the other hand, Finland, which had a population of four million after the Second World War, developed a unique relationship with the Soviet Union, with which Finland had more than 1000 km of land and sea border. In its foreign relations, Finland conformed to Soviet positions in so far as they benefited Finland as well. But on the other hand, the Finnish political leadership looked the other way, for example, when human rights violations were committed by the superpower (13, 14). All the same, an unusual interactive relationship was established between the Communist Soviet Union and the capitalist democracy of Finland in Northern Europe across front lines in the Cold War, and both parties strove to benefit from the relationship. This special relationship between the Soviet Union and Finland must be taken into account when the role of Finland is explored in international environmental politics in the Baltic Sea region.

Our study focuses on the Baltic Sea, which is one of the regional seas of the world. The Baltic Sea turned out to be sensitive to pollution because it is fairly shallow and has poor water exchange with the Atlantic Ocean and the ice that covers the Baltic Sea during the long winter puts a further strain on the ecosystem. In the end, the pollution of the Baltic Sea became perhaps the most serious international environmental problem in Northern Europe, affecting in one way or another the population of more than 80 million people living in the Baltic Sea basin. Even the vigorous national actions of individual states were not enough to protect the sea. However, establishing an effective system for marine protection was easier said than done, for in order to curb emissions, cooperation between the states was necessary in politically divided Northern Europe (Fig. 1).

The history of Baltic Sea pollution and its prevention has not been adequately studied. In particular, the important period preceding the historic 1974 convention has not been given the attention it deserves; it is precisely this period that is the focus of our study. In recent years, the environmental history of the Baltic Sea has begun to be explored by investigating the emergence of pollution problems in the sea areas of coastal cities around the Baltic Sea at the end of the 19th century and
during the 20th century (15–18). The history of water protection policy at the national level has been neglected. Only in Sweden has the development of national debate on water protection in the early 20th century been investigated (19). With regard to the former socialist states in the Baltic Sea region, research has been limited to some publications that examine the general trends of environmental management and environmental legislation mainly in recent history (for exceptions see publications 20–23). However, another topic of research that has received even less attention than national water protection policy is international marine protection policy in the period preceding the Helsinki Convention of 1974 (24).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Of particular interest from the viewpoint of the history of environmental politics in the Baltic Sea region is the hypothesis according to which the international political circumstances created by the Cold War played a role in the process that led to the signing of the Helsinki Convention. This hypothesis has been suggested in several studies but it has not been studied in depth so far (7, 8, 25–29). In our study this hypothesis is examined with the help of hitherto unpublished documentation and archival material. Our study concentrates on the history of the origins of the Helsinki Convention and particularly on an empirical examination of the views of parties that played an essential role in international environmental politics with respect to the Convention. This brief presentation focuses on state-level parties from the end of the 1960s to 1974, not on the other political parties or the socioecological processes behind the Helsinki Convention (30).

The study is based primarily on historical analysis of primary sources. The principal sources we have used in the research are the archives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. A significant part of this archival material consists of exchanges of information between leading Finnish politicians and civil servants of the Ministry, which have not been previously used in historical research. Much of the material was confidential until recently. The research material provides a fairly comprehensive description of not only Finnish viewpoints but also of the views about environmental politics held by other states in the Baltic Sea region, particularly by the Soviet Union and Sweden. This article is the first study that explores the international political history of the Helsinki Convention signed in 1974.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION OF THE BALTIC SEA AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

In 1970, Europe celebrated the European Nature Conservation Year. Concerns about the environment were also reflected in international politics, especially in the West, where governments wanted to project an image of having a responsible environmental agenda. Environmental policy, which had previously played a marginal role in public administration, now began to be perceived as a means of responding to the public pressure but also of building up cooperation and cultivating a positive international reputation. Finland gradually began to compete against Sweden in the area of international environmental politics (31, 32).

The deterioration of the state of the Baltic Sea was naturally the basic premise that created the need to develop international cooperation. But a variety of purely political factors encouraged governments to take the lead and highlighted the significance of cooperation on the protection of the Baltic Sea for Finland, in particular. Cooperation on environmental protection was used to foster trust between countries that belonged to opposing military alliances, for environmental protection, as such, could not be deemed to involve questionable motives from the perspective of international politics (7, 33, 34). Consequently, the promotion of environmental protection was seen as useful to both the Eastern and Western blocs.

In practice, the states around the Baltic Sea had engaged in environmental cooperation even before they signed the Helsinki Convention. In 1968, Finland and the Soviet Union agreed on scientific and technological cooperation relating to the Gulf of Finland, and both parties were apparently content with this cooperation (35–36). Some years later, Sweden and the Soviet Union engaged in similar research cooperation pertaining to the Baltic Sea. Finland and Sweden had also traditionally worked together extensively on environmental issues, although the two countries did not sign actual agreement on cooperation regarding the Baltic Sea environment until 1972.

Swedish Initiative and the German Question

After the Second World War, the Baltic Sea became a politically divided area. As a result, the two neutral countries in the region, Finland and Sweden, were the only ones that could take the lead in intergovernmental negotiations on cooperation related to the area without provoking political conflicts between the superpowers (Fig. 1).

Sweden took the first initiative. It advocated an agreement between the states around the Baltic Sea to protect it from oil...
discharges from ships. However, meetings held in 1969 and 1970 in Visby, Sweden, resulted only in two separate protocols that stressed the importance of joint efforts in matters relating to the environmental protection of the Baltic Sea and that were hoped to serve as bedrock for possible future agreement. No international agreement was signed because the NATO countries in the region felt unable to endorse an agreement with all the neighboring governments. This, in turn, was a condition set by the Soviet Union, Poland, and the GDR (36). In practice, the Visby meetings made it clear that the West did not accept the government of GDR as a contracting party (37).

The underlying issue was the division of Germany. During the Cold War GDR and FRG did not officially recognize each other, and their allies did not recognize the existence of the opposing state. This deadlock, known as the “German question,” also hindered protection of the Baltic Sea, for the signing of international cooperative agreements required that all parties be recognized as sovereign states. Whereas FRG would not recognize GDR, the Soviet Union set the participation of GDR as a condition for signing any convention on international environmental protection (37–38).

The attitudes of the Finnish and Swedish governments differed on the German question. Sweden, along with other Western countries, had officially recognized FRG at the end of the 1940s, but it had not recognized GDR. Finland, in contrast, had not recognized either state, so the Finnish Government was able to promote cooperation on environmental protection without the disadvantage faced by the Swedes. On the other hand, both the West and the East had some reservations about Finnish neutrality. The West saw Finland as being firmly in the Soviet sphere of influence, which raised doubts about the ultimate aims of Finland. The Eastern faction felt that things were as they should be; all they asked Finland to do was to stop emphasizing its neutral status (39). Indeed, the key difference between Finland and Sweden was Finland’s good relations with the Soviet Union. Because Sweden appeared to the Eastern bloc as being partial on the German question, the initiative in establishing cooperation on the environmental protection of the Baltic Sea shifted from the Swedish Government to the Finns. Soon after the Visby meetings, officials in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland began to generate ideas for a more comprehensive convention on the protection of the Baltic Sea environment. The Finns believed that the Soviet Union would look more favorably on initiatives taken by Finland than those taken by Sweden (40). After all, it was common knowledge after the Visby meetings that Sweden would not sign an intergovernmental agreement in which GDR was a contracting party, whereas Finland was prepared to enter into “[...] any multilateral agreement, if [other] countries are also capable of entering into it” (41). For as long as the German question caused friction between the Baltic coastal states, Finland remained the most acceptable choice to convene an intergovernmental conference on the protection of the Baltic Sea.

Thanks to cooperation on the environment, Finland could present itself as a peace-maker between the states around the Baltic Sea and strengthen its policy of neutrality and its role as an active international player. The Finns hoped that environmental cooperation would later have a positive impact on the organization of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), in which both Eastern and Western European countries were expected to participate. Initially on the proposal of the Soviet Union, Finland began to plan the organization of the CSCE in 1969. Finland’s highest leaders rated the organization of the CSCE, along with the nurturing of relations with the Soviet Union, as the most important international goal of Finnish foreign policy at the time.

First Finnish Attempt

At the beginning of 1971, the Finnish Government believed that preparations for the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area should begin immediately, because it seemed that the international political obstacles could be overcome (42, 43). The German question, in particular, was heading for a resolution: in January 1971, the leaders of GDR and FRG, Willi Stoph and Willy Brandt, had initiated negotiations on the normalization of relations between the two countries. Significant progress had also been made in the border dispute between the Germanies and Poland, which had led to a formal recognition of the Oder-Neisse line by FRG in December 1970 (44, 45).

The idea of an international conference on the pollution of the Baltic Sea was realized in the spring of 1971. During a visit to Moscow, Finnish President Urho Kekkonen expressed his country’s willingness to host such a conference, and the Soviet prime minister Alexey Kosygin gave the green light to the idea (40). Finland wanted to take a cautious approach and started by sounding out the views of Sweden and Denmark, which were considered as politically less sensitive than other countries in the region. In consultations that took place in July 1971, both Sweden and Denmark reiterated their previous position: the initiative was welcome in principle, but GDR could not be a party to an intergovernmental convention. However, the consultations concluded with an agreement that Finland would extend a general conference invitation to all Baltic coastal states. Preparations for the conference would take time, and the German question would perhaps be resolved in the meantime, in a manner that would be satisfactory to everyone involved (46). An unofficial invitation was immediately issued in Summer 1971 after the meeting of the representatives of Finland, Sweden, and Denmark. Later in the same autumn the matter was made public in Ottawa during preparatory consultations for the first United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment. The invitation was repeated also in Stockholm in 1972 during the UN conference (47–49).

At the same time, pressure to promote environmental protection was growing, especially after the media became aware of plans for the Helsinki conference. Moreover, alarming headlines on the deterioration of the marine area circulated in the press, such as “Life beginning to fade in the Baltic Sea” (50). The media sent a clear message to the decision-makers: the states around the Baltic Sea had to work together against pollution or else they would have nothing to save (51).

The Legal Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland was looking for alternatives to circumvent the German problem. One of the ideas was to enter into a nongovernmental agreement between expert organizations. Another idea that was put forward was to sign several multilateral agreements that would have the same contents. These proposals, among others, were rejected, but one alternative was developed further. This involved the signing of trilateral agreements between Sweden and Finland and the Soviet Union (46).

The idea of trilateral cooperation between Finland, Sweden, and the Soviet Union was initially suggested by marine researchers. Bilateral research cooperation between Finland and the Soviet Union had functioned well. This led in 1970 to discussion on extending the cooperation to include a third state. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs also began to chart opportunities for cooperation, because concerted efforts between Sweden, Finland, and the Soviet Union to compile research knowledge to be used in marine protection would have constituted a significant step in the right direction (52–54). The coastal area belonging to Sweden, Finland, and the Soviet Union covered four-fifths of the Baltic coastal line, and at the
The preliminary agreement to arrange an international conference to promote the protection of the Baltic Sea was made between the President of Finland, Urho Kekkonen, and the Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin in Moscow in 1971. This picture illustrating the good relations between the two leaders was taken during a field trip in the Caucasus Mountains 2 years earlier. Photo: The Archive of President Urho Kekkonen.

The main aim of Finland's foreign policy was to arrange the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. President Gerald Ford and General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev met in a good atmosphere during the CSCE conference held in Helsinki in 1975. The days of pioneering international environmental cooperation were, however, counted when détente came to an end in late 1970s. Photo: The Archive of President Urho Kekkonen.

time it was thought that most of the pollution deriving from human activities and ending up in the Baltic Sea came from these states. The resolution of environmental problems could be addressed through trilateral cooperation until political conflicts had been settled and a more comprehensive agreement could be reached. It was hoped that the trilateral cooperation would encourage other states to gradually join the cooperation on marine protection, which would lead to a convention on the protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea, signed by all the Baltic coastal states (55, 56).

The Soviet Union and the German Question

The project outlined by the Finnish Government received a positive initial response from the Soviet Union and Sweden. However, the Soviet representatives stressed in no uncertain terms that if the Finnish proposal included the idea of intergovernmental trilateral agreements the Soviet Union would reject the initiative. In contrast, the Soviets could accept research cooperation between authorities, but even this arrangement should involve the opportunity for other states to sign on at a later date (55, 57).

Based on the initial discussions, Finland was prepared to push ahead following a tight schedule, but the project met with resistance. When Åke Wihtol, the Deputy Director-General of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, put forward the above-mentioned proposal for cooperation to the Soviet ambassador in Helsinki, he was met with a cool response. The ambassador deemed the Finnish proposal to be an attempt to circumvent political realities and accused the Finns of wanting to initiate negotiations without the participation of all the Baltic coastal states (58). Despite the reluctance of the Soviet ambassador, Finland decided to submit an initiative to the Soviet Union on trilateral cooperation. In April 1972, the Soviet Union issued its response: the participation of GDR was a necessary precondition for the resolution of any international affairs relating to the protection of the Baltic Sea environment (59).

The Soviet environmental policy concerning the Baltic Sea was tied in with the German question. Since 1969, the Soviet Union had tried to persuade Finland to recognize GDR, hoping that other Western countries would follow suit (43). It was hoped that a multilateral agreement on the protection of the Baltic Sea would promote a resolution to the GDR question. Finland was trying to strike a balance in these conflicting circumstances. According to the consensus in Finland, "the matter at stake is the degradation of the Baltic Sea, not the German question" (60). But the German question was nevertheless part of the international political circumstances of the Baltic Sea area, and it could not be ignored. The Soviet Union demanded that Finland unilaterally recognize GDR, whereas the Finns feared that such a decision might bring about retaliation from the Western powers. FRG let it be understood that if Finland were to recognize GDR under pressure from the Soviet Union, this would not only jeopardize Finland's position as the designated host of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, but it would also compromise Finland as a host of any subsequent multilateral conference (61). The Finnish Government refused to yield to Soviet demands.

At the beginning of 1972, some people continued to hold out hope that the precarious state of the Baltic Sea environment would be discussed in Stockholm at the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in June 1972. However, shortly before the conference was due to begin, the Eastern bloc countries stated that because GDR was not allowed to participate in the conference, they would not be sending their representatives to Stockholm (25). As the Soviet Union and Poland boycotted the Stockholm conference, it was impossible to effectively address the Baltic Sea issue. The failure of the Stockholm conference added weight to the Finnish initiative. An intergovernmental conference between the Baltic Sea states, as suggested by Finland, was now the only opportunity on the horizon to promote protection of the Baltic Sea.

Finnish patience was rewarded when FRG reported, at the end of October 1972, that a resolution to the German question was close at hand. The final breakthrough came quickly afterward: on 7 November 1972, the representatives of FRG and GDR announced that they had reached agreement on fundamental issues. The two countries signed the agreement known as the Basic Treaty on 21 December 1972 in which FRG finally recognized GDR as an independent state (45). The resolution of the German question removed the most difficult obstacle to international cooperation on the protection of the Baltic Sea.
Finland’s Chances of Hosting the Conference Uncertain

Once the political deadlock seemed to be broken, Finland immediately sent an official conference invitation via its embassies to all the states around the Baltic Sea. The reason for Finland to hurry the preparations of the conference was that Finnish officials feared, quite rightly, that the conference could be assigned to some other country, as no agreement had been reached as to the host country of the conference. Because of the competition between Finland and Sweden in the field of international environmental policy, Finns were afraid that the Swedes would succeed in taking over the conference arrangements. There were also rumors that in bilateral consultations with Sweden, Poland had expressed its interest in arranging such a conference (62, 63).

Finland could not afford to lose the advantage offered by its neutrality policy (64, 65). The Ministry for Foreign Affairs feared that Finland “would lose its current political edge as the case of the two Germanies has been settled for good and the other Nordic countries have established diplomatic ties with GDR. (…) In this situation Sweden, for example, would be more competitive as a conference host, thanks to its greater resources” (66). Diplomats spoke thus openly about the competition between the two countries for obtaining a significant environmental conference.

After the treaty between FRG and GDR had been signed Finland’s initiative gradually started advancing in the Baltic Sea states. The fear of losing the conference to Sweden proved unfounded when Sweden, along with Denmark and GDR, was the first Baltic Sea country to announce its willingness to participate in a conference hosted by Finland (67). As for FRG, the Soviet Union, and Poland, all three hesitantly waited for each other’s responses to the conference invitation. Poland waited for the Soviet Union’s acceptance, the Soviet Union waited for FRG’s acceptance, and FRG was still hesitant about consigning an agreement with GDR, despite the Basic Treaty that had been concluded between the two countries (68).

Even though such uncertainty prevailed and the responses of some coastal states were delayed, Finland started drafting the text of the convention, as it had agreed with Sweden, Denmark, and the Soviet Union that Finnish experts would form a Baltic Sea commission to draw up a draft of the convention text (69). At the same time, these countries had agreed about the arrangement of an expert meeting in late May and early June 1973 (70).

In the course of Spring 1973 those countries that had previously been hesitant about the conference gave their acceptance to the arrangement of the expert meeting. Poland’s response came in early March, FRG responded in late March, and the Soviet Union’s final response came as late as 15 May 1973, only two weeks before the expert meeting was scheduled to take place (71–73). Thus, the contracting parties were finally known in Summer 1973.

Contents of the Convention

Shortly before the expert meeting, alarming rumors reached Finland. In contacts between marine researchers, Finns had been led to understand that the socialist countries were willing to promote bilateral environmental protection, but that multilateral agreements would be out of the question. Also, the socialist countries opposed the idea that the convention would include information on pollutants discharged into the sea. According to them, demands for such information were equivalent to industrial espionage, for which reason the convention should concentrate on airborne pollutants and the pollution drifting into the Baltic Sea from the North Sea (74). Although the Baltic Sea commission had suggested that all known sources of pollution should be included in the convention, Germany, for its part, suggested that the convention be limited to the prevention of oil pollution (75–77). Evidently, there was no unanimity as to the contents of the convention on the protection of the Baltic Sea at this point.

Finland decided to go ahead with the preparation of the text of the convention and the expert meeting was held, as planned, in Helsinki between 28 May 1973 and 2 June 1973. The differences and conflicts that had surfaced earlier were also discussed at the meeting. Finland’s representative Paul Gustafsson thought that FRG’s reluctant attitude toward the conference became clearly evident from the conduct of the German representatives. Gustafsson suspected, however, that the representatives had been forbidden to thwart the plans for the conference, if the other coastal states were favorably disposed to the idea. The Soviet Union favored the organization of the conference and emphasized the importance of the convention to the country. On the other hand, the Soviet Union also insisted that the sea area within 12 nautical miles from respective coastline should not be included in the geographical coverage of the convention, but instead, each country would be independently responsible for monitoring and protective action in its internal waters (78, 79).

Finland offered once again to host the Diplomatic Conference on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, and the participants agreed that the conference would be held in early 1974. At the same time, a preparatory committee was established, and its first meeting was set for November 1973. Finland agreed to prepare a draft of the convention text on the basis of suggestions from all Baltic coastal states (80, 81).

The draft was finished by the beginning of October and comments by the representatives of the coastal states were almost unanimously positive (82). The only controversial issue remained the inclusion of territorial waters in the geographical coverage of the convention. In bilateral consultations, Finland and Sweden had agreed that the inclusion of territorial waters was of the utmost importance in the prevention of pollution (83). The Soviet Union, for its part, held its ground and insisted that territorial waters were not to be included in the convention (84). In the end, the Soviet Union had its way; the security considerations of a superpower superseded environmental considerations and thus the Soviet coast remained closed for outsiders.

The text of the convention gradually began to take its final shape. In the consultations between the coastal states only Sweden and FRG suggested any amendments to the convention text proper. The focus of discussion on the convention had shifted from problems of international politics to issues of environmental protection. But, according to some comments, the efforts to create an extensive general agreement in which all of the Baltic Sea states could take part left the possibilities of further environmental protection far too meager (85, 86). The text of the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area was almost finished in Autumn 1973. The text was then handed over to the legal authorities for final polishing, and by February the guidelines approved by all states had been formulated into a single document. The meeting of the legal authorities finally dared to announce the long-awaited news: “each participant state will sign the convention after the conference” (87, 88).

Implementation of the Helsinki Convention

The long and complex process leading to the Helsinki Convention was brought to a close in 1974. At the end of the conference held in Helsinki between 18 March 1974 and 22
March 1974, the Finnish Foreign Trade Minister Jermu Laine was able to propose to the representatives of the Baltic Sea states that the international Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area be approved. All the states concerned were unanimous in approving the convention (89). After careful preparation, the convention was finalized, and the signatories could join forces in seeking solutions to the environmental problems plaguing the Baltic Sea. The principle of building trust between states was noted in the convention: “Awareness of the significance of intergovernmental cooperation in the protection of the marine environment of the Baltic Sea as an integral part of the peaceful cooperation and mutual understanding between the nations of Europe” (1).

As the contents of the convention had been worked into an extensive general agreement covering all known sources of pollution, both from land and ships, and the entire sea area in question, it was the first of its kind in the world. But the convention was only a prelude to practical cooperation. The Helsinki conference established the Baltic Marine Environment Protection Commission (Helsinki Commission [HELCOM]), which was to start operations once all seven signatories had ratified the convention. While the ratification was in process, the commission was to be substituted by an interim protection commission, which was assigned with the task of establishing common procedures, practices, and criteria for the launching of concrete protective actions. International cooperation in marine protection required assessing and harmonizing the scientific and technological practices of the signatory countries, which proved to be a demanding task in such a divided area, both politically and culturally, as the Baltic Sea. For example, debates dragged on for years over the terms of reference of the convention, such as the definition of “pollution” (7). Finally by 1980 all the coastal states had ratified the convention, and thus the Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area officially entered into force.

The delay in ratifying the convention may also have been caused in part by Cold War tensions in international politics. Because Denmark and the FRG had become members of the European Community, they were not entitled to accede independently to international agreements with respect to matters already covered by European Community legislation. Because the EC had issued an agreement concerning marine pollution in 1976, it had a privilege to join the Helsinki Convention. However, the existence of this privilege was denied by the Soviet Union because it did not wish to recognize the EC as a subject of international law. Eventually Denmark and the FRG ratified the convention independently from the EC (90). To a certain extent, this incident anticipated the current friction between HELCOM and the European Union in the Baltic Sea region.

The delicate background of international politics behind the Helsinki Convention was reflected in restrictions of authority, too. Above all, the decisions of HELCOM were only nonbinding recommendations. HELCOM responsible for the implementation of the convention did not turn into a supranational organization on the divided sea area that could have obligated the contracting parties to engage in protective actions. Moreover, questions of responsibility were not adequately taken into account when the convention text was drafted. From a regional perspective, the convention was restricted most by the Soviet demand, based on the national security doctrine of the Soviet Union, not to include territorial waters in the contents of the convention. As a consequence, the authority of the HELCOM did not extend to the coastal zone, which was the most polluted area (see Fig. 2). Even after the difficult international political issues related to the Baltic Sea region had been resolved, power politics still prevailed over environmental politics.

Nevertheless, the recommendations of HELCOM were founded on the constantly worrisome state of the Baltic Sea, the prestige of governments, and growing interest in environmental cooperation. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the re-independence of the Baltic States, the Helsinki Convention was revised and re-ratified in 1992 (91). Thanks to wide international cooperation, the amount of environmental toxins, in particular, in the Baltic Sea gradually started decreasing.

CONCLUSIONS

In Spring 1974, the states along the shores of the Baltic Sea could be content about the joint achievement of the East and West. Finland was twice as pleased; after all, the convention was the result of years of hard work by Finnish politicians and officials who proved able to overcome Sweden in the competition for international environmental agreements. However, the most significant achievement of the Helsinki Convention was that environmental cooperation between the Baltic Sea states rose to a new level, for the convention was the first multilateral agreement between members of two competing military alliances.

Underlying the convention were the Cold War and political rivalry exploiting environmental concerns about the Baltic Sea. The Soviet Union propagated on a general level for environmental politics to show its cooperativeness also in the Baltic Sea region (7). The Helsinki Convention was also advocated by the Soviet Union, which, however, mainly used it to put pressure on the other Baltic Sea states to recognize GDR. Hence, it may be argued that the Soviet Union at first used the emerging international environmental issues as a new tool of power politics.

Sweden had initiated efforts to work out an international agreement for the protection of the Baltic Sea, but had failed as it would not recognize GDR. The first UN Conference on the Human Environment, hosted by Sweden in 1972, failed partly for the same reason: the Soviet Union and the other Eastern bloc countries boycotted the conference. Therefore the initiative for a convention on the protection of the Baltic Sea shifted from Sweden to Finland, which in the international political "play-offs" remained the only country in the Baltic Sea area credible enough to negotiate with both the East and the West. The promotion of the protection of the Baltic Sea also suited the agenda of the political leadership of Finland, which realized that environmental issues could be used to further the country’s main diplomatic objective, which was hosting the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Environmental cooperation brought the Eastern and Western blocs closer to each other and thus paved the way for a greater political end,
the stabilization of the political situation in all of Northern Europe. The Cold War and international environmental politics crossed paths in exceptionally favorable circumstances at the beginning of the 1970s, for at the time, a process of political détente was well underway in the Baltic Sea region. In hindsight, it was fortunate that the negotiations that led to the signing of the Helsinki Convention took place precisely then. For the first time in international relations, the climate of détente culminated in concrete environmental cooperation (Fig. 2). But then the Helsinki Convention also paved the way for an improvement of international relations in the Baltic Sea region in general. However, the mid-1970s could be characterized as a watershed of détente in Europe. After that it was clear that both the spirit and momentum of détente were beginning to falter because of the Soviet attack on Afghanistan and new conflicts on other continents (92, 93). Fortunately the Helsinki Convention created new environmental policy institutions in the Baltic Sea region that ensured the continuation of marine protection. We conclude that the relation between the Cold War and the environment was reciprocal. On the one hand, the environment was one of the new actors and issues that called into question the meaningfulness of the Cold War itself. On the other hand, the gradual relaxation of Cold War tensions enabled international environmental politics to emerge. Therefore environmental policies not only reflected the state of international environment and political order, but also shaped them by requiring new collective action to protect the common environment, in this case the Baltic Sea.

References and Notes

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94. Our study was supported by the BIREME research programme coordinated by the Academy of Finland, by the Network for European Studies of the University of Helsinki, and by the Finnish Cultural Foundation. We wish to thank PhD Frank Fullensider for revising the language and MA Salla Jokela for drawing the map.

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