



End of an era: Future of Nordic security from a Finnish perspective

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- When Finland and Sweden become NATO Allies, the already existing Nordic cooperation structures can and should be built on when making joint defence plans for the Nordic region.
- Developing a strong own Nordic-Baltic defence structure and demonstrating the ability to defend oneself will rather guarantee than discourage a continued US commitment to the region's security.
- With a new focus on territorial defence, a certain degree of regionalisation will be a reasonable and likely unavoidable feature of the evolving Nordic-Baltic security architecture. Instead of preventing it, the countries in the region should work together to increase the coherence of NATO's deterrence posture.

Summary

With the full-scale attack on Ukraine, Russia crossed a red line for Finland, prompting the country to abandon its long-term military non-alignment policy and seek NATO membership. Finland is thus moving away from the decades-long emphasis on good relations with its eastern neighbour and instead towards the clearest possible deterrence posture. The now coherent Alliance membership of all five Nordic countries will unlock new ambition levels in the regional framework of NORDEFCO that were hitherto blocked by Finland and Sweden remaining outside of the NATO command structure.

Introduction: U-turn in Finno-Russian relations after February 24

In 2007, Finland's then-Defence Minister Jyri Häkämies said [in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) in Washington, D.C.: “[G]iven our geographical lo-

cation, the three main security challenges for Finland today are Russia, Russia and Russia.” The speech caused a controversy at the time, having so openly named Russia as a security challenge. After the Cold War, Finland’s security policy was based on two main principles: attempting to maintain as good as possible neighbourly relations with Russia, on the one hand, but also keeping up a strong national defence capacity, on the other – should the good neighbourly relations fail. An integral part of that security policy approach was to have a cautious official rhetoric towards the eastern neighbour, and certainly not openly call it a security threat, although it has been undisputed common knowledge. Indeed, in the 8 decades since the Winter War 1939-40, when the Soviet Union attempted to invade Finland but failed, Finland’s defence capabilities have been developed with a view to protecting the 1343 km long border with Russia. That includes a conscription army, giving the Finnish Defence Forces a wartime strength of 280,000 troops and an additional reserve of 870,000. Seeing Russia’s indiscriminate use of heavy artillery fire in Ukraine, it is also no coincidence that Finland has one of the strongest artilleries in Europe and is also investing heavily into the air force – Finland will introduce 64 F-35 fighter jets from 2026 onwards.

It was all the more remarkable that in August 2022, [in a speech at the annual ambassadors’ conference](#), Finland’s foreign minister Pekka Haavisto increased the number of security threats to Finland to include 5 times Russia, namely

1. Russia’s increasing willingness to take risks,
2. its ability to put pressure on its neighbours by amassing troops at the border,
3. loose talk on nuclear or chemical weapons,
4. war crimes Russian troops have committed in Ukraine, and
5. the demand that NATO should not accept new members.

In President Niinistö’s words, [the masks have fallen](#) – Russia has shown its true face and the conclusion Finland drew from it was clear. No amount of self-restraint can guarantee a country’s security in the direct vicinity of a revisionist Russia that seeks to re-establish a security order based on spheres of influence. Since the invasion, Finland’s state leadership has become unprecedentedly outspoken in its assessment of Finland’s relations with Russia.

With the full-scale attack on Ukraine, Russia crossed a red line for Finland, prompting the country to abandon its long-term military non-alignment policy and seek NATO membership. The decision to apply for full membership in the Alliance, after decades of deliberately building a closest possible partnership and investing into interoperability just below the threshold of full membership, is indicative of the paradigm shift currently in process: Finland is moving away from the decades-long emphasis on good relations and instead towards the clearest possible deter-

rence posture. The reason is simple: although geography cannot be changed and for better or for worse, Russia will remain Finland’s neighbour, there is no basis for rebuilding constructive relations in the foreseeable future with a country that without provocation and for no good reason invades its neighbours.

Nordic-Baltic security outlook

Helsinki’s threat assessment in the Nordic-Baltic region in light of Russia’s war in Ukraine is straightforward: Russia poses not only a more abstract threat to democracy but also a very concrete potential future threat to the security of the whole region. The war is, however, not a sudden disruption but the culmination of a long-term development. Russia had already been shifting the parameters of “[good neighbourliness](#)” well before the invasion of Ukraine into a direction that increasingly limited its smaller (Nordic) neighbours’ room for manoeuvre. Especially in the Arctic region, where [Russia has been notably building up its military presence](#) in the past decade and harbours its [second-strike nuclear capability](#), Russia’s zero-sum understanding of security has increasingly complicated constructive win-win relations already well before escalating into outright war in Ukraine.

To counter the heightened threat, Finland’s decision – and importantly, also Sweden following Finland’s example – to join NATO is of paramount importance. Their membership in the Alliance harmonises the hitherto fragmented security architecture of the Nordic and Baltic Sea region when all five Nordic countries will be members of the Alliance and thus subject to more coherent, joint defence planning. In fact, NATO’s pledge at the Madrid summit, included in the new Strategic Concept 2030, to “defend every inch of Allied territory at all times” would not be feasible in the Baltic-Nordic region without the two new members.

In Finnish defence policy, the previously stronger emphasis on the Baltic Sea region has been shifting towards viewing the [wider geographic area of the Baltic Sea through the North Atlantic to the Arctic](#) already before Russia’s attack on Ukraine. In the [2021 Defence Report](#) of the government, the wider Nordic-Baltic region was identified as one coherent military-strategic area. The need for strong deterrence was also already clearly stated in the 2021 report (p. 25):

“The importance of a strong deterrence function – dissuading an adversary from using military force against Finland – is accentuated in the current, unpredictable operating environment where the early warning period for military crises has shrunk and the threshold for using military force has been lowered.”

In a similar tone, already the [2016 Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy](#) noted that Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 had created a vicious circle, “resulting in increased tension and military activity in the

Baltic Sea region” (p. 11). Furthermore, Russia’s growing military presence in the Arctic region has been under close observation, further contributing to rising tensions. The 2016 report concludes: “The use or threat of military force against Finland cannot be excluded” (p. 11). The fact that Russia indeed invaded Ukraine on a full-scale, was therefore, not an entirely surprising development from a Finnish point of view – albeit nevertheless shocking in its brutality.

Finland’s “NATO option” and the Nordic security framework

For Finland, the so-called “[NATO option](#)” was an important part of Finnish security policy. While full-fledged NATO membership was not considered necessary and was also seen as a potential provocation toward Russia – risking costly tensions at the long border – Finland nevertheless reserved the right to reconsider, should the security environment significantly change. Playing the NATO card also had [a signal function toward Russia](#), as an answer to the Russian “threat tradition” regarding Finland’s possible NATO membership that has been an established part of the bilateral rhetoric for the past decade.

Regional defence cooperation in the NORDEFECO (Nordic Defence Cooperation) format as well as bi- and trilaterally with Sweden and Norway has played a key role in Finnish security thinking. Since Russia’s annexation of Crimea, which presented a particularly rude awakening for Sweden that had cut down its military spending and capabilities notably in the early 2000’s, Finland and Sweden have intensified their bilateral cooperation to a very close level. Bilateral structures include in the maritime area joint units such as [the Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group \(SFNTG\)](#), [Swedish-Finnish Amphibious Task Unit \(SFATU\)](#) and [Sea surveillance cooperation Finland and Sweden \(SUCFIS\)](#). The aim of these joint units is to improve maritime situational awareness in the Baltic Sea as well as deepened cooperation of amphibious troops in the SFATU and all warfare areas except for submarine warfare in the SFNTG, on the operational side. Additionally, a recent example of Finnish-Swedish land force interoperability was the [Vigilant Knife](#) exercise held in Northern Finland in early September 2022. Planned with only a few days’ notice, 800 Swedish soldiers and officers, as well as the Swedish Archer artillery system, were placed under Finnish command to test the readiness of joint structures and rapid deployment of Swedish forces to Finland. In the air domain, the most notable Nordic defence cooperation structure is the [almost weekly joint exercises](#) of the Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish air forces in Lapland.

When Finland and Sweden become NATO Allies, the already existing Nordic cooperation structures can be built on when making joint defence plans for the Nordic region. Conversely, the Nordic partners can help facilitate and speed up Finland and Sweden’s full integration into the Alliance. With the now coherent Alliance membership of all five Nordic countries, in the regional framework of NORDEFECO new ambition levels can be unlocked that were hitherto blocked by Finland and Sweden remaining out-

side of the NATO command structure. The [political will to deepen the Nordic cooperation](#) has been given already since 2014, and with the removal of the remaining formal hurdles, the Nordic cooperation – as well as with the Baltic States – can fulfil its potential as stabilising factor in Northern European security.

Conclusion: Inevitable regionalisation?

After a phase of focusing on interventions and crisis management in the beginning of the 2000s, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 caught NATO countries off guard and brought back the necessity to think in terms of territorial defence in Europe. Many NATO member states had significantly cut down their military spending and standing forces to fit the expeditionary force model, making them inadequate for convincing and effective territorial defence and conventional deterrence. With NATO now going back to the roots to a focus on Article V, the question of balancing – to some extent inevitable – regionalisation and NATO’s collective defence in the whole Alliance is a question that needs to be addressed in the Nordic-Baltic region.

With Finland and Sweden’s accession, NATO will for the first time have a group of member states with a high degree of existing regional defence cooperation structures. Furthermore, it can potentially lead to a shift of focus within NATO that 8 of 32 member states have an existential interest in and a strategic focus on Baltic Sea and Northern European security.

From the perspective of the Baltic States, having been for a long time in the focal point of potential Russian aggression, the question of the desirable degree of regionalisation is particularly tricky. On the one hand, Finland and Sweden as NATO members revolutionise the defence planning of the Baltic States, easing their difficult strategic location between Russia and the Baltic Sea and giving them much-needed – and hitherto lacking – strategic depth. The Swedish island Gotland, an ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’ in the middle of the Baltic Sea, only 330km from the Russian exclave Kaliningrad, significantly improves NATO’s supply, troops and equipment movement to the Baltics. In the Gulf of Finland, only a narrow strait of international waters between Finland and Estonia will be left open for Russia’s Baltic fleet, significantly restricting Russia’s room for manoeuvre and intimidation opportunities. On the other hand, the three Baltic States had to fight long and hard to get rotating NATO contingents to their soil. Even though the defence perspective of the Baltics improves notably with the Finnish and Swedish NATO accession, the Baltic States nevertheless do not want to risk losing the hard-fought for commitments they have from other NATO member states – most importantly the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK).

The three Nordic NATO members Denmark, Iceland and Norway face the same question. Denmark has been balancing its participation in Nordic initiatives and [its traditional atlanticist view of security](#), while Iceland does not

have own armed forces and hence depends on Allies for its defence. Norway has been the sole gatekeeper of the High North in NATO and so far displays no great appetite to fundamentally changing its “[deterrence and reassurance](#)” approach to security, which includes the question of permanent NATO troops on its soil and NATO activities up north, close to the border with Russia. All three Nordic Allies have their own good reasons for wanting to avoid too much focus on a ‘Nordic(-Baltic) Club’ within NATO. However, while it is important that the new Allies Finland

and Sweden are properly integrated into NATO’s full collective defence, a degree of regionalisation makes sense. With a new focus on territorial defence, forced on the Allies by Russia’s aggression, “building a strong own Nordic-Baltic defence structure will be crucial. Demonstrating an ability to defend oneself – at least until other Allies arrive – will also rather guarantee than discourage a continued US commitment to the region’s security.” The stronger own capabilities European Allies can develop, the stronger and more balanced the whole Alliance will be.

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