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SMALL BUT READY: HOW FINLAND HAS PREPARED TO DEFEND ITSELF



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WRITTEN BY: OCTAVIO BELLOMO



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EDITED BY

EDWARD JAMES COLOMBO

Abstract

The Nordic nation of Finland is expected to join NATO in the coming months. Despite its size, it will be an asset, not a liability. Finland faces many national security concerns, primarily originating from Russia. However, Finland has gradually developed an impressive military well-equipped to defend the country. Significant procurements in the air force, army, and navy will reinforce Helsinki's vital role in the Baltic and even Arctic theatres. Furthermore, the Finnish comprehensive security model connects state and non-state entities in the interest of national security, leading to greater resilience and preparedness in Finnish society. This model results in a unique hybrid resilience, which is critical considering Russia's propensity for hybrid warfare.

Threats to Finnish National Security

As the Russian Federation built up arms and troops near the Ukrainian border and eventually invaded, the possibility that the same might happen to Finland drove Helsinki to apply for NATO membership (Valtioneuvosto, n.d.). Following defeats against the USSR in the Winter and Continuation Wars during World War II, Finland remained an unaligned country throughout the Cold War. Therefore, seeking collective defence in NATO is a momentous change in Finnish foreign and defence policy.

The Finnish Ministry of the Interior (FMI, 2023) identifies Russia and its aggressive war as top threats to national security. These threats take various forms, from military force to migration pressures, energy supply disruptions, transport disruptions, and nuclear power plant accidents (FMI, 2023). Equally, the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (SUPO) (n.d.) also highlights Russian threats to critical infrastructure, cyber-attacks, and cyber espionage.

Finland shares a 1,300 km border with Russia and proximity to two critical cities: Saint Petersburg and Murmansk (Nyberg, 2022). This border has also made Russia an important trading partner, and Russian airspace is important for planes flying to or from Finland (FMI, 2023). The FMI (2023) states, however, that since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, energy supplies from Russia have had to be replaced, and the new "overflight restrictions have affected Finland's international aviation" (p. 65). The large border is also a fundamental consideration for Finnish defence planning, as it can become a source of military pressure (FMI, 2023).

Arguably Helsinki's most crucial strategic area is the Baltic Sea. The importance of the area is evident since, according to the FMI (2023), "Measured in tonnes, maritime transport accounts for approximately 90% of the exports and nearly 80% of imports in Finnish foreign trade" (p. 63). If sea lanes in the Baltic were directly threatened, they would be "extremely difficult" to replace with land and air alternatives, severely impacting the economy and Finnish society (FMI, 2023, p. 63). In an invasion scenario, this could challenge attempts to deliver aid to Finland, as goods and equipment would have to be supplied by air or land via Sweden or Norway.

Finnish Capabilities

Despite its small population of 5.5 million, Finland has consistently maintained a substantial military which is the country's main deterrent (Digital and Population Data Services Agency, n.d.; FMI, 2023). The Finnish Army has around 13,400–22,800 active personnel, 9,000–18,400 of which are conscripts (Finnish Defence Forces [FDF], n.d.b; International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2023). The navy has about 3,150–4,600 active personnel, of which 1,750–3,200 are conscripts (FDF, n.d.c; IISS, 2023). Finally, the air force has around 3,050–3,300 active personnel, with 1,000–1,300 conscripts (FDF, n.d.a; IISS, 2023). Finland maintains conscription which enlists all men at 18, though non-military civil service is also an option; women can also join voluntarily (FDF, n.d.d). Following conscription, personnel remain in the reserves until age 50 or 60 (FDF, n.d.d).

Thus, while not having large numbers of active personnel, Finland boasts a wartime strength of 280,000 soldiers and 900,000 citizens as reserves (FDF, n.d.e; IISS, 2023).

According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2023), Finland has 200 German Leopard 2 (2A6 and 2A4) main battle tanks (MBT), 212 Soviet and Swedish mechanised infantry fighting vehicles, 613 Finnish and Soviet armoured personnel carriers (APC), 682 American, Czechoslovak, Finnish, South Korean, Soviet, and Swedish artillery units, as well as a range of air defence and engineering/maintenance vehicles. Finland has one of Europe's most significant artillery forces (Lucas, 2012; Tanner, 2021; Vanttinen, 2022). There are several pieces to highlight from the army's equipment. The Leopard 2 is a capable MBT due to its tough armour and modern firing capabilities (Gao, 2020; Noreika, 2023). Unsurprisingly, the Finnish Government has been considering whether to send the Leopard 2 to Ukraine (Yle, 2023). Helsinki also seems content with the Korean K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzer, as the acquisition of another 38 was recently announced (Verdict Media, 2022). Meanwhile, Finland domestically produces many of its armoured vehicles. Most Finnish APCs are the Patria/Sisu Pasi (XA series), some of which have allegedly been sent to Ukraine (Army Recognition, 2022).

Due to the country's geography, Finnish troops are accustomed to cold climates. The Finnish Jaeger Brigade is well-acquainted with arctic warfare training, a great asset in the far north (FDF, n.d.f; Pesu & Paukkunen, 2022). Finnish troops, including the Utti special forces Jaeger Regiment, are often involved in training exercises with other countries where, for instance, American troops partake and experience winter in the northernmost provinces of the country (Bye, 2023; FDF, 2022). With an abundance of reservists, modern equipment, and specialised tactics, Finland is not an inconsequential military power in the region.

The Finnish Navy is relatively small but formed around a central focus on homeland defence (Toremans, 2020). The navy has 20 patrol and coastal combatant ships, a myriad of support and landing crafts, five minelayers, and three Katanpää-class mine countermeasure vessels, a derivative of the Italian Gaeta-class ship (IISS, 2023). With a jagged coastline filled with islands, rocks, and varying water levels, Finnish waters are suited to implementing mine warfare, while the eight fast attack craft offer offensive capabilities (Toremans, 2020).

The four Hamina-class fast attack craft are undergoing a mid-life upgrade with a "world-class naval system, further strengthening the Finnish Navy's operational capability" (Saab, 2020, para. 6; Toremans, 2020). Finland is also building new corvettes through the Ministry of Defence's Squadron 2020 programme, which will replace the other four Rauma-class fast attack crafts, two Hämeenmaa-class minelayers, and the already decommissioned Pohjanmaa minelayer (Finnish Ministry of Defence [FMD], n.d.c). The new ships will be four new Pohjanmaa-class multi-role corvettes capable of open-sea surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare, and minelaying while also being operationally capable even through the Baltic winter (FMD, n.d.b). The programme should be completed by 2028, although Finnish news outlets have reported that it will be delayed until 2029 (FMD, n.d.c; Tanner, 2020). Regardless, if and when Finland accedes to NATO, the Atlantic alliance will have firm control over the Gulf of Finland, with the membership of Finland on one side and Estonia on the other. While this potentially endangers Saint Petersburg in a hypothetical conflict with NATO, it bears repeating that Finnish naval capabilities are principally for defensive purposes.

The air force primarily comprises 55 F/A-18C and seven F/A-18D Hornets (IISS, 2023). Other aircraft are for training and transportation, including the C295M transportation aircraft (IISS, 2023). However, with the service life of the Hornets ending in 2030, the Ministry of Defence set out to acquire a new multi-role fighter through the HX Fighter Programme (FMD, n.d.a). Helsinki chose the Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II and will receive 64 starting in 2026 (Lockheed Martin, n.d.; Yle, 2022). The Finnish Government considers it the top choice aircraft in terms of military capability while also being the most cost-effective: "The F-35 had the lowest procurement cost when considering all aspects of the offer. The operating and sustainment costs of the system will fall below the 254 million euro yearly budget" (FDF, 2021, Affordability section, para. 1). Overall, Finland has what it needs to protect its airspace and the purchase of the F-35 will surely guarantee this for the next few decades.

As for NATO, Finland can participate in Enhanced Forward Presence and air policing (Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2022). More significantly, Finland can play an important role in the Baltic and Arctic domains, reinforcing the latter with powerful long-range artillery and, with the delivery of the F-35s, an important air presence to counter Russian aerial access/aerial denial (Pesu & Paukkunen, 2022). Regarding interoperability, the Finnish military is experienced in conducting joint military exercises, having a particularly long relationship with Norway and Sweden through frameworks like the Nordic Defence Cooperation (Särkkä, 2022).

In conclusion, with Finland's population and economic size considered, the country has not ignored its military needs. Helsinki is spending 2.1% of its national GDP on defence, which cannot be said for most of Europe (IISS, 2023). For the national defence requirements of the country, Finland has a capable army, navy, and air force, with the latter two having new critical developments on the horizon with the Pohjanmaa-class corvettes and the procurement of F-35s.

Finnish Resilience and Preparedness

The Finnish Ministry of Defence (2017) identifies seven interlinking "functions vital for society", which include "leadership", "international and EU activities", "defence capability", "internal security", "economy, infrastructure and security of supply", "functional capacity of the population and services", and "psychological resilience" (p. 14). These make up the Finnish comprehensive security model. To connect areas of society to security and defence, Finland has a three-week national defence course in which prominent members of society learn about national security; Braw (2022) explains, "As countries try to stave off hostile activities, having top corporate managers who understand national security and their respective organizations' role in it is indispensable" (Declarations section, para. 11). In this manner, national defence and the role of civilians has been ingrained in Finnish society, which benefits matters of leadership, defence capability, and psychological resilience, while also interlinking with the economy and the functional capacity of society.

Finnish preparedness and resilience come from over a century of having a shared border with a global military power and the policy of neutrality during the Cold War despite having a significantly smaller population than Russia or the USSR. An example of Finnish preparedness is the thousands of civil defence shelters across the country that are integrated into ordinary buildings, around 5,500 in Helsinki alone, as well as the capital's massive tunnel system (City of Helsinki, n.d.; de la Cuétara, 2022; Millar & Hawke, 2018).

The state, businesses, organisations, and the citizenry coordinate preparedness in Finland (FMD, 2017). Thus, comprehensive security is both a state and non-state matter, with measures in place to prepare Finnish society for a possible national emergency.

A result of this model is Finland's hybrid resilience. Hybrid warfare can be understood as an asymmetric combination of traditional and non-traditional warfare that often involves cyber warfare and is aimed at challenging "cohesion, decision-making, and cooperation by creating a wedge with dissonance" (Elonheimo, 2021, p. 114). State and non-state organisations are targeted. Finland's comprehensive security model is uniquely prepared for the challenges of hybrid warfare. As Lt. Col Elonheimo (2021) explains:

No organization or decision-maker can have situational awareness without information from other stakeholders. Thus, sharing best practices, knowledge, actions, and systems across civilian and state authorities enhances state-led security. A comprehensive approach where information flows freely between stakeholders improves identifying signals and threats early enough to start the required analyzing, assessing, and decision-making processes. (p. 127)

The result is a model where, in the event of political interference or cyberattacks, there can be an adequate response at every level of society (Elonheimo, 2021). This approach does not imply that there are no vulnerabilities, but, as the Bank of Finland Governor Olli Rehn (2023) recently stated, Finnish "resilience builds on an all-encompassing culture of preparedness" (para. 21). It is no surprise that the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats was founded in Helsinki, which is also "the only actor having both the EU and NATO work and conduct exercises together, with activities covering a wide range of domains from civil to military, and from hostile influencing to hybrid warfare" (Hybrid CoE - The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, n.d., para. 5).

Finland in NATO

The Russo-Ukrainian War has left a worrying precedent for countries sharing a border with the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, Finland's accession into NATO still remains undetermined by Ankara and Budapest's unwillingness so far to ratify the decision. The gradual introduction of Finland into NATO practices might be the effective signalling needed.

There is much that Finland can provide to the NATO alliance. While its military might appear small, it is backed by a large reserve force and modern equipment. Finland has been defending itself for over a century and, with GDP expenditure in defence of over 2%, shows a willingness to meet its defence requirements. With its powerful artillery and tank fleet, upcoming modern multi-role corvettes, and formidable air force that will be further buttressed by the procurement of the F-35, the Finns have strong capabilities in all three military branches. Finland can provide NATO an important presence in the European northeast and Arctic regions, as well as an attractive, whole-of-society, comprehensive security model. Allies could take inspiration from the Finnish cross-sector information-sharing model, especially between state and non-state actors and regarding national security and defence, leading to better preparedness and resilience. NATO has in Finland a capable, innovative, resilient, well-located, and well-prepared potential member.

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