

## BRIEF

FINLAND: INTEGRATING A  
NEW ALLYWASHINGTON SUMMIT SERIES  
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**With Russia continuing to wage war in Ukraine and demonstrate hostility towards the west, Finland and its neighbour and closest ally Sweden joined NATO in very different circumstances from those of their predecessors. While there have been, as former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö predicted, suspected and proven Russian hostilities in Finland's neighbourhood, including the severing of the Balticconnector gas pipeline and a data cable in the Baltic Sea and instrumentalised migration on its eastern border, Finland's first year as an Ally passed with few surprises. Even so, membership has brought change. For example, Finland had been reluctant to consider permanent NATO presence on its soil, but there have been signs that this policy may be adjusted. This brief considers what might be expected from Finland's Alliance politics at the Washington Summit and beyond.**

Finland's accession on 4 April 2023 was followed by a dip in the level of public discussion about the Alliance. The NATO 'hype' was over, and Alliance membership had become mostly business as usual. There is, however, no room for complacency as the threat of large-scale military conflict continues to cast a shadow over Europe. While Finland had relentlessly prepared itself for this eventuality throughout the post-Cold War period it must now, as NATO's northernmost frontline state, adapt to a new reality.

Three important aspects shape Finland's present and future stance regarding the Alliance. First, reform is needed to incorporate NATO's Article 5 of the Washington Treaty into Finland's security and defence policy, alongside the national defence responsibilities codified in

the Treaty's Article 3.<sup>1</sup> Second, Finland now has an opportunity, through unilateral formats, to play a connecting role between the Nordic and Baltic countries and to promote Nordic-Baltic approaches to enhancing the regional security order. Third, domestically, Finland will have to discuss difficult questions following its accession to the Alliance. These include its position on NATO's nuclear defence and deterrence, substantial increases in long-term defence spending, and possible future legislative changes in the field of security and defence.

## NATO INTEGRATION

Finland joined NATO without preconditions or caveats. Its first challenge is to learn how to balance its Article 3 and Article 5 obligations. Finland's defence posture throughout the Cold War was that of a militarily non-aligned state with a highly independent defence mentality. Despite participating in an increasing number of bi, tri- and unilateral cooperation formats, it continued to rely on credible and independent national defence through much of the 2000s. This longstanding concept of self-reliant territorial defence, implemented by a massive 280 000 wartime structure and close to 900 000 peacetime reservists, has shaped Finland's mindset and prepared it to face the worst alone.

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It will take time for Finns to move away from thinking that territorial defence is a purely national business. And while NATO membership challenges this thinking, it does not mean that

Finland has got everything wrong. The Finnish position has always been that NATO's Article 3 and Article 5 commitments are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. Now, Finns must learn to communicate more strongly the message that a strong national defence is the core of NATO's collective defence and deterrence capability.

*Ideas about deterrence commonly held in NATO are new to Finnish defence thinking and vocabulary*

Even so, NATO membership unavoidably entails participation in collective defence and deterrence. Little-by-little Finland is starting to comprehend the significance of this. Finnish doctrine has included the idea that a small state could not threaten anyone militarily (as part of a concept of *pidäke*—anything that impedes a potential aggressor) thus even ideas about deterrence commonly held in NATO are new to Finnish defence thinking and vocabulary.<sup>2</sup>

Making things a little easier, Finland's accession occurred at an optimal moment in NATO's defence planning cycle: its invitee status was confirmed in the early phase of the four-year process. It is also already on board with NATO's concept for deterrence and defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, and fully integrated with the new family of regional plans agreed at the Vilnius Summit. Allied activity has been very visible in Finland over the past year.<sup>3</sup> It has hosted several ground, air, and sea deployments and participated in various exercises in the Nordic-Baltic region at unprecedented scale.<sup>4</sup>

Ahead of the Washington Summit, NATO defence ministers have supported the establishment of a Multi Corps Land Component Command in Finland, possibly to be co-located with the national Army Command headquarters in Mikkeli. This will emphasise Allied deterrence efforts on the northernmost north-east flank and perhaps also signals a shift in Finnish strategic thinking towards a more enthusiastic embrace of collective defence and deterrence. Finland's agreement to host a NATO Forward Land Forces (FLF) presence (no details have been made public) is a significant change in security and defence policy, apparently marking another step in this direction.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the NATO command structure, Finland has continuously lobbied to be assigned to Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk. It has argued that NATO will need an enhanced deterrence and defence posture on its northern flank and the alternative assignment—to JFC Brunssum—would dilute Finland's strategic interests as this command lacks expertise to support operations in extremely demanding Arctic conditions.<sup>6</sup> Behind this rationale also lies Finland's strong commitment to defence cooperation with the

Nordic countries through NORDEFECO, and to bi- and trilateral relations with Sweden and Norway in particular. Furthermore, Finland considers the US to be a key strategic partner and ally; the two countries signed a bilateral defence cooperation agreement in December 2023.<sup>7</sup> At their pre-summit meeting, defence ministers also supported the assignment of the two new Nordic Allies to JFC Norfolk, although in practice this may take some time to realise as Norfolk is at present only thinly staffed.<sup>8</sup>

## A NORDIC-BALTIC APPROACH

As the newest frontline state with NATO's longest land border with Russia (over 1 300 km), Finland finds itself with multiple roles.<sup>9</sup> It is something of an exception in NATO as its geography and terrain differ from those of its Baltic, central and southern Allies. It has a pivotal geostrategic location in both northern and eastern Europe and has the abundant strategic depth so lacking in the Baltic countries, making it more challenging for Russia to conquer. However, Finland's northernmost territories are more vulnerable to Russian challenges, as Russia hosts nuclear weapons in the Kola region. Meanwhile, Finland's location at the back of a pocket in the Baltic Sea and its heavily reliance on maritime trade, means that negative developments in the Baltic Sea region could put Finnish society on its knees within a few weeks.

Given these unique circumstances, Finland should consider how to develop and advance a position as a Nordic-Baltic connector. Developing a Nordic-Baltic approach could mean a more active, forward leaning policy regarding NATO's collective defence in the Baltic Sea region. This would not necessarily mean only

placing substantial numbers of troops into NATO FLF structures, as Sweden has proposed with its battalion-minus-level commitment in Latvia. It could also include other contributions, such as sending troops to Estonia or providing training grounds for the German-led FLF brigade deployed to Lithuania.

Finland should also consider how it could promote and act as a connecting factor in Nordic-Baltic cooperation—and beyond—and raise Nordic-Baltic (NB8) multilateral defence cooperation to a new level.<sup>10</sup> President Stubb's recent visit to the Bucharest 9 Summit in Latvia, for example, should be viewed as an expression of Finland's interest in promoting closer ties with all NATO eastern flank countries. Cooperation in these formats should help to ensure that the dividing line in NATO's operational area between JFCs Norfolk and Brunssum should not hamper the ability of different Allied forces to act in unison in the region. Furthermore, exercising and operating together might also be useful in ensuring Nordic-Baltic interoperability for possible future out-of-area operations.

## BEYOND WASHINGTON

Other challenges related to Finland's NATO membership still lie ahead. NATO's nuclear defence and deterrence, for instance is uncharted territory for Finland. As a country with a strong tradition of advocating nuclear disarmament, Finland has yet to define how it situates itself regarding the Alliance's nuclear posture. There are different options, but it is most likely that a solution will be found somewhere in the middle, through an active but non-aggressive profile involving participation in NATO's nuclear exercises, but not in its nuclear sharing arrangements.<sup>11</sup>

Polls indicate that public opinion is largely favourable towards Finland's involvement with nuclear issues inside NATO.<sup>12</sup> This is primarily explained by Russia's brutal war on Ukraine, which opened a window of opportunity to explain the limits of conventional defence and deterrence and extend the logic to the nuclear domain. For example, over 70 % of Finns feel

favourable towards Finland's active participation in NATO's nuclear policy, a level that was previously unforeseen.<sup>13</sup>

*With a declining national economy, Finns may have to weigh questions of collective defence against societal issues*

Finland's NATO 'hype' has, however, already reached its peak. It is unlikely that the upward trend of interest and support will continue, and future public views will depend on how the costs and benefits of NATO membership play out in the minds of private citizens. The economic impacts of NATO membership, for example, will not be felt until after 2027, when the completion of the procurement of the F-35 multirole combat aircraft will mean that Finland's defence spending no longer comfortably exceeds the 2% NATO target. With a declining national economy, Finns may have to weigh questions of collective defence against societal issues. Finland needs to start planning now for how it will make its commitment more sustainable in the longer term to meet NATO's financial expectations.

## WHAT KIND OF ALLY?

Finland's recently elected President, Alexander Stubb, describes Finland's current foreign and security policy stance as "cool, calm, and collected."<sup>14</sup> This mantra helps to explain why Finland should succeed as an Ally once the dust of the Washington summit has settled and its membership has become more established. With a small population and one of the largest geographical areas in NATO Europe, Finland will simply have no other option against Russia's threat than to prepare comprehensively and to stay resilient in holding society together. As an Ally, in Washington and beyond, Finland will continue to work to integrate with NATO while maintaining a pragmatic, down-to-earth approach to both national and collective security.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "In order more effectively to achieve the objectives of this Treaty, the Parties, separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, will maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack." NATO, "[The North Atlantic Treaty](#)," 4 April 1949.
- <sup>2</sup> Antti Pihlajamaa and Iro Särkkä, "[NATO's New Northern Dimension. The Evolving Role of the Alliance in Europe's North](#)," *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, Finnish Foreign Policy Paper 11, April 2024, 35.
- <sup>3</sup> Thomas Nilsen, "[U.S. surveillance jet makes first mission up to northern Finland](#)," *The Barents Observer*, 25 March 2023.
- <sup>4</sup> Emelie Moregård, "[Nordic Response 2024 – NATO returns to the North in large scale](#)," *FOI*, Memo 8504, April 2024; Finnish Defence Forces "[Nordic Response 2024](#)."
- <sup>5</sup> Ministry of Defence (Finland), "[Naton puolustusministerit antoivat tukensa Suomen Nato-integraation tavoitteille](#) [NATO's defense ministers gave their support to Finland's NATO integration goals]," 14 June 2024.
- <sup>6</sup> Government of Finland, "[Suomi valmis isännöimään Naton toimintoja](#) [Finland is ready to host NATO activities]," 15 February 2024.
- <sup>7</sup> Government of Finland, "[Government report on Finnish foreign and security policy](#)," 20 June 2024, 25.
- <sup>8</sup> Ministry of Defence (Finland), "Naton puolustusministerit antoivat tukensa Suomen Nato-integraation tavoitteille."
- <sup>9</sup> Matti Pesu, "[NATO in the North: The emerging division of labour in Northern European security](#)," *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, Briefing Paper 370, 19 September 2023; Matti Pesu and Tuomas Iso-Markku "[Finland as a NATO Ally. First Insights into Finnish Alliance Policy](#)," *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, Finnish Foreign Policy Paper 9, December 2022; Wojciech Michnik, "[Nordic Frontline States? How Finland and Sweden impact NATO's security](#)," *PeaceRep Conflict & Civicness Research Group*, 28 March 2024.
- <sup>10</sup> Iro Särkkä, Minna Ålander, Joel Linnainmäki and Antti Pihlajamaa, *Finland's Partnerships as a NATO Member: Prospects for defence cooperation in a multilateral framework* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2024).
- <sup>11</sup> Tapio Juntunen, Jyri Lavikainen, Matti Pesu and Iro Särkkä, "[Naton ydinasepelote ja Suomi](#) [NATO's nuclear deterrent and Finland]". *Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 2024:2*, January 2024.
- <sup>12</sup> [Suomalaisten mielipiteitä ulko- ja turvallisuuspolitiikasta, maanpuolustuksesta ja turvallisuudesta](#) [Finns' opinions on foreign and security policy, national defense and security] (Helsinki, The Advisory Board for Finnish Defence Information, 2024)
- <sup>13</sup> SM Amadae, Hanna Wass et. al., "[From a peace project to a security union? Finns' expectations for security and defense policy in the 2024 European Parliament election](#)," *NATOPoll*, Policy Brief 1/2024, 14.
- <sup>14</sup> Henri Foy, "[Why Finland's Stubb wants EU to be 'cool, calm and collected' on Russia](#)," *Financial Times*, 12 April 2024; President of the Republic of Finland, "[Speech by President of the Republic of Finland Alexander Stubb at the Parliament of Estonia, the Riigikogu on 27 May 2024](#)," 27 May 2024.

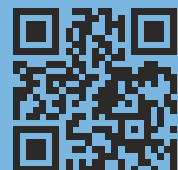
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