

Finnish View on European Security

Esa Pulkkinen*

Finland is a small nation at northeastern corner of Europe. With a landmass of approximately 340,000 square kilometers and 5.6 million inhabitants, Finland is Europe's 8th largest by area and 26th by population. Some of the special features of Finland are dependency on the sea routes of communication in the Baltic Sea (over 90% of trade), more than one third of Finland's area is north of the polar circle and there are more than 100,000 lakes in Finland.

Finland was a part of the Swedish kingdom for over six hundred years and was annexed by Russian empire after the Finnish War 1809. After 108 years of Russian rule, Finland declared independence in 1917. Since then, we have shared a 1,343-kilometer-long common border with our eastern neighbor. There were two times when Russia, then the Soviet Union, tried to remove that border, the Winter War (1939-40) and the Continuation War (1941-44).

From Finland's geographical position, and due to its history, it is not difficult to deduct what Finland considers as its main threat militarily. The thoughts on security environment I am about to describe are well shared between the Nordic and Baltic nations.

For decades, Russia has maintained and developed its nuclear and conventional deterrence that relies on long range weapon systems and a power projection capability. Russian armed forces in the vicinity of Finland are concentrated on the Karelian isthmus in the south and at the Kola peninsula in the north. Russia has declared that their aim is to reinforce these formations, and the number of troops is planned to grow from the pre-Ukrainian war 30,000 up to 80,000. At the moment of writing this article, Russian army garrisons close to Finnish borders are more or less empty because of deployment to Ukraine.

The Arctic region is, and will maintain, strategically important. Kola peninsula is critical for Russia's nuclear deterrence and second-strike capability. With the melting of the polar ice cap the Arctic Sea route becomes more accessible and important. Economy is a key theme of Russia's Arctic policy, and the militarization of its Arctic region is advancing side-by-side with the use of arctic natural resources.

* General(retired); Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence of Finland; Chairman of Finnish Security Committee; Director General of the EU Military Staff (EUMS, 2016-2020).

In addition to Russia, China is also interested in the Arctic region. The arctic area is one of the focus areas of China's strategic long-term plans. This will likely be visible in how China develops its armed forces in the future.

Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022 revealed that Russia is not only capable but also willing to use military force in order to pursue its goals. The war in Ukraine has now lasted over three years. Despite the enormous number of casualties suffered, Russia pushes towards its original objective to destroy Ukraine as a sovereign state.

Russian security thinking shows an ambition to create an unbroken sphere of influence in Europe, reaching from the Arctic to the Baltic Sea and to the Black Sea. The rising international tensions in one region may rapidly lead to increased military activities in other regions as well.

Before Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine, in Finland we saw that we can manage our security environment being militarily non-aligned. The thinking in Finland was that with a strong national defence capability and being a part of European Union is enough to deter Russia. Possible armed conflict with Russia was seen as possible as part of a larger European conflict. What happened in Ukraine proved that premise wrong. Russia concentrated all its military force against one single nation, and we saw that it could be possible also with regards to Finland.

In a broader perspective, Finland sees that if Russia succeeds and can declare victory in Ukraine, it does not stop there. Russia's appetite for enlargement would likely grow stronger and that would put all its neighboring countries in danger. That is why we see that support to Ukraine and to Ukraine's demands for fair peace are paramount.

Finland applied for NATO membership in May 2022 and was accepted to the alliance in April 2023 in the record speed of 11 months. Sweden applied NATO membership at the same time and was accepted as a member a year later in March 2024. Without the accession of Sweden to the alliance, Finland's membership would not have been complete. That is obvious by just looking at the map.

Finland and Sweden bring more than one million square kilometers of land, sea and air mass to the alliance. Finland's and Sweden's membership do not change the map but the interpretation of the map of northern Europe is now completely different.

With the gained area, there is now strategic depth to the defence of NATO's northeastern border. By enlargement, NATO is also more capable of defending the Baltic states. The Baltic Sea has become a NATO sea. All Baltic Sea nations (except Russia) are members of the alliance.

Finland and Sweden bring strong land, air and sea military capabilities to the alliance. Capabilities that are designed to operate on harsh arctic conditions. With these capabilities, Finland and Sweden can put up a strong force to protect NATO's northern flank.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to the alliance means that all the five Nordic Countries (FIN, SWE, NOR, DEN, ISL) are part of NATO. For decades, there has been strong Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) between the five, but the NATO-membership gives it a whole new gear. We are not anymore tied with restrictions and can plan, train, and execute military operations below and above NATO's article five. Nordic Countries also possess military capabilities Russia must reckon with. For example, fleets of more than 250 modern fighter jets and strong naval surface and below surface capabilities.

Unlike many European nations, Finland has maintained its strong conventional defence capability. That is not about to change being militarily allied. In Finland, we firmly believe that strong national defence (NATO article 3) is the basis for credible NATO's article 5.

Finland has a conscription system and can mobilize an army of 280 000 with trained reserve of 900 000 men and women. Moreover, Finland's defence acquisition has focused on spearhead capabilities in all three services. Beside sheer numbers and capabilities will factor is also crucial. Seventy-eight percent of all Finns believe that if Finland was Russian attacked, they should take up arms to defend themselves in all situations, even if the outcome seems uncertain.

With this said about Finnish and Nordic military capabilities, I can say with conviction that NATO's northern flank holds.

In addition to war in Ukraine we have seen that almost anything can be weaponized. Energy, information, media, immigration, cyber just to name a few. They are so called hybrid methods of influencing. For example, we have witnessed several destructions of undersea infrastructure at the Gulf of Finland.

In many cases of hybrid influencing, like the ones at the Gulf of Finland, attribution is extremely difficult. We can't rule out that there is a state actor behind the destructions. In the current security situation, Russia will likely increase the use of all hybrid methods as it seeks to cause disunity within NATO, the European Union and the United States' commitment to the security and defence of Europe.

To counter any types of security threats, Finland has developed unique model of Comprehensive Security. It is a model that we have developed and refined since the Second World War. It is a model of Finnish preparedness, where vital societal functions are handled together by authorities, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and citizens.

Finland publishes governmental resolution titled Security Strategy for Society that outlines the principles of comprehensive security, describes vital functions for society, assesses risks and gives strategic tasks for administrative branches. In 2025, Finland released the fifth update of the strategy. In this edition, alongside preparedness, a new theme is response measures to disruptions and crises. Also, the role of individuals as key actors of security is emphasized.

An essential aspect of the execution of the strategy is monitoring its implementation. In Finland, comprehensive security reporting is carried out through a Security Report for Society which is submitted to the government annually, as well as other assessments and reviews published regularly.

The Finnish model as such does not fit for other countries but I firmly believe that there are parts and practices which can be adopted to other societies as well.

