

NATO'S NEW NORTHERN DIRECTION
THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE ALLIANCE IN EUROPE'S NORTH

Joel Linnainmäki / Matti Pesu (ed.) / Antti Pihlajamaa / Iro Särkkä / Henri Vanhanen



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This Finnish Foreign Policy Paper examines NATO's evolving role in Northern Europe. It tracks the development of the alliance's foothold in and approach to the region from the early Cold War years to the present era. Moreover, it contextualizes the region within NATO's politico-military decision-making system, characterized by diverse threat perceptions and strategic divergences. The study also sheds light on Finland's contribution to NATO's collective defence in Northern Europe and beyond.

Northern Europe has become a central arena for NATO's deterrence and defence efforts, in stark contrast to its Cold War role as a subordinate flank of the Central European theatre. Finland has a key role in this emerging allied regional architecture. It is a militarily capable Baltic-Arctic bulwark protecting its allies in the Western and Southern directions. Although Finland's defence mindset will continue to be marked by a notable national orientation, Helsinki is seriously seeking to build a middle-ground approach that strikes a functional balance between national and collective defence tasks and contributions.



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INTRODUCTION

Matti Pesu

RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE invasion of Ukraine has shaken the foundations of European security. Indeed, the effects of the aggression have reverberated throughout the Old Continent, with the impact being particularly strong in Northern Europe. Moscow's unprovoked attack prompted Finland and Sweden to join NATO¹ – a development that has fundamentally shaped the politico-military geography of Europe's north. The enlarged and reinvigorated NATO alliance is again in the process of bolstering its deterrence and defence posture, with Northern Europe serving as a key arena for these efforts.

In fact, some commentators have even argued that the centre of gravity of European security “will continue to shift to the north and east”.² Be that as it may, Northern Europe is currently attracting practical and analytical attention, as policymakers and pundits ponder the best and most effective way for the alliance and its allies to beef up regional security.³

This Finnish Foreign Policy Paper will assess Northern European security from several perspectives. It places NATO's policies and posture in Northern Europe in a historical context. It also examines how Northern Europe, with its priorities and threat perceptions, fits into NATO's political and military decision-making system, which is characterized by different threat assessments and strategic divergences. The paper also zooms in on Finland's ongoing adaptation to NATO membership and evaluates Finland's potential contribution to Northern European security – its immediate security concern – and beyond.

One of the key standpoints of the study is that the Northern European security environment should be analyzed as a single entity. In strategic terms, the region consists of the Baltic Sea area, the European Arctic and Northern Atlantic maritime area, and even the North Sea environment. Although these sub-regions have their own distinctive security dynamics,

their security situations are inherently interconnected. Finland's strategic role embodies this reality. As Finland's new president, Alexander Stubb, put it, “[w]e [Finland] are geopolitically one of the most important frontline states in Europe. Our feet are in the Baltic and our head is in the Arctic”.⁴

The report comprises three chapters written by different experts. In the first chapter, Henri Vanhanen analyzes how Northern Europe has evolved from the Cold War's “forgotten flank” to a key arena of contemporary Euro-Atlantic security. The chapter also explores how NATO has concretely aimed to ensure security in its northern direction, which is today considerably larger than when the alliance was established in 1949.

The second chapter, written by Joel Linnainmäki, delves into NATO's decision-making. It briefly touches on how the alliance makes decisions, formally and informally. It also sheds light on intra-alliance diplomacy from the perspective of different threat perceptions and strategic divergences. This is followed by an analysis of NATO's evolving threat landscape with a particular focus on terrorism, Russia and China. Lastly, it positions Finland and Northern Europe in the system of allied decision-making.

In the third chapter, Antti Pihlajamaa and Iro Särkkä analyze the military aspects of Finnish NATO membership and assess Finland's contribution to NATO's collective defence. The chapter addresses several issues ranging from NATO's military strategy to the evolving Finnish defence mindset, as well as the balance between national and collective defence needs. It also touches on more concrete aspects of deterrence and defence, such as NATO's command structure and operational plans, as well as Finland's potential role in Article 5 operations in different contexts.

The study draws on an extensive list of sources, not only building on recent scholarship on NATO but also on established literature on the alliance. It also examines several media sources and statements by Finnish and allied officials. Additionally, the authors have analyzed various primary sources, such as NATO's older and

1 Lundqvist 2022; Pesu & Iso-Markku 2024.

2 Alberque & Schreer 2022, 68.

3 Neretnieks 2022; Pesu 2023; Ålander 2023; Vanhanen 2023; Friis & Tamnes 2024.

4 Kirkkala 2023. See also Pesu & Iso-Markku 2022.

more recent strategic concepts, their implementation documents, and NATO summit communiqués. These primary and secondary sources are complemented by information received from more than a dozen confidential background discussions with officials and security experts.

The study is part of a project by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs titled “NATO in the North, the North in NATO”, which is funded by the Finnish Ministry of Defence and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The project work has been supported by a steering group appointed by the two ministries. Besides the authors of the report, Programme Director Harri Mikkola has also been involved in the project.

1 NORTHERN EUROPE IN NATO: FROM THE FRINGES TO THE FOREFRONT OF EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY

Henri Vanhanen

NORTHERN EUROPE constitutes Finland's immediate security environment. It is also an increasingly central theatre for NATO's deterrence and defence efforts, as well as one of the potential hotspots in the European security environment, characterized by NATO-Russia tensions. This chapter traces the evolution of NATO's foothold in Northern Europe from the beginning of the Cold War to the post-2022 era.

1.1 THE COLD WAR AND NORTHERN EUROPE'S STRUGGLE AS THE "FORGOTTEN FLANK"

The strategic importance of Northern Europe for Euro-Atlantic security has varied over the past 80 years, ranging from periods of high tension to more cooperative times. To begin with, the Northern European security architecture was profoundly shaped by the outcome of the Second World War, and the security environment was subsequently marked by the adversarial relationship between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, established in 1949 and 1955 respectively. This strategic setting – portrayed in Figure 1 – remained unchanged until the re-unification of Germany and the collapse of the communist bloc.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the dominant power in Northern Europe, both geographically and militarily. The posture of the Soviet and the Warsaw Pact troops in Northern Europe was strong, particularly in the Baltic Sea area, where it clearly outgunned the Western alliance. Moscow and its satellites controlled the Eastern and Southern parts of the Baltic Sea region, whereas NATO's foothold was limited to the strategically significant Danish straits. In the Arctic security landscape, Norway – with its 200-kilometre land border with the Soviet Union – was NATO's eyes and ears in the area close to the Kola Peninsula, which was one of the most militarized regions on the globe.⁵

Furthermore, the neutrality of Finland and Sweden gave the regional security landscape a distinctive

flavour, coupled with a certain ambiguity. Whereas Finland was bound to the Soviet security sphere through the Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, Swedish neutrality was Western-leaning, involving a secret plan B to align the country with the Western alliance should its non-alignment fail in a potential NATO-Warsaw Pact conflict.⁶

The difference between the respective Finnish and Swedish neutrality policies was also reflected in NATO's strategic assessments. The alliance's strategic guidance (MC 14/1) from 1952 declared how "it is clear that Scandinavia must be defended as a whole... Plans for the defence of Norway and Denmark, *and also of Sweden*⁷ should this be possible, must therefore be integrated".⁸ NATO's view on Finland was strikingly different, echoing doubt about Finland's capability to defend itself against the Soviet superpower. The guidance stated that "Finland will attempt initially to remain neutral. She will not willingly give the USSR any military assistance, and will try to avoid giving permission for Soviet troops to move into Finland. She may be expected to fight if Soviet forces enter Finnish territory".⁹

In the first decades of the Cold War until the 1960s, the northern flank was primarily associated with southern Scandinavia and the Baltic approaches, the areas being viewed as a 'tactical flank' of the Central Front. In 1962, the British Commander-in-Chief of NATO's northern command illustrated this situation by noting how "in order to secure North Norway one had to be in full control of South Norway. In order to secure South Norway one had to control the Baltic approaches. In order to hold the Baltic approaches one had to control the Danish isles and Schleswig-Holstein."¹⁰

From the 1940s to the 1960s, the strategic importance of the Arctic region was mainly based on its role as the shortest route for US and Soviet bombers and missiles into the territories of both sides. The perception of

5 See e.g., Solli & Solvang 2024.

6 See e.g., Dalsjö 2006; Kansikas 2017.

7 Emphasis added.

8 NATO 1952, 20.

9 NATO 1952, 8.

10 Riste 2007, 225.



Figure 1. Map of the Cold War strategic setting in Northern Europe (NATO, neutrals, USSR and the Warsaw Pact).

strategic significance was reinforced by Soviet efforts to enhance its Northern Fleet. The strategic importance of Northern Europe for NATO began to intensify in the 1960s due to the Soviet naval build-up and the subsequent allied awakening to regional maritime challenges related to the Soviet ballistic missile submarine threat. Indeed, the Soviet Northern Fleet was home to more than half of the Soviet Union’s strategic submarines and two-thirds of its nuclear submarines by the 1980s.¹¹ To protect this strategic stronghold, the Soviet Union developed a so-called Bastion Defence Strategy, aiming “to ensure the survival of strategic ballistic missile submarines – as well as the related infrastructure – in their enclosed and well-defended maritime areas”.¹²

As a result of these developments, the region was no longer viewed merely as a subordinate theatre and a tactical flank of the Central Front, but had intrinsic strategic value of its own. The Supreme Allied Commander Atlantic (SACLANT) listed supporting the

defence of Northern Norway as a top priority in 1968.¹³ During the latter part of the Cold War, NATO thus perceived Northern Europe as an increasingly integral part of the alliance’s security. Control of the northern coasts of Norway was seen as necessary to prevent the Soviet Union from threatening the vital US supply routes to Central Europe.¹⁴ Losing the northern flank could have been detrimental to its effort to defend the central front.

To counter Soviet capabilities in the Arctic, NATO focused its maritime activities on intelligence and surveillance capabilities in Norway, Iceland, the United Kingdom, the Barents Sea, and the strategic GIUK Gap (located between Greenland, Iceland and Britain). Throughout the Cold War, monitoring the GIUK Gap was the most effective way for NATO to detect the movement of Soviet ballistic submarines in the Atlantic, where they could have threatened American supplies to the European theatre. NATO developed underwater interception points for this purpose in the GIUK Gap,

¹¹ Foggo & Fritz 2018.

¹² Mikkola 2019, 4.

¹³ Dyndal 2011.

¹⁴ Tamnes 2001.

but as Soviet submarine technology developed, these were established further north and eventually as far north as the Barents Sea.¹⁵

Although Northern Europe was a secondary theatre for NATO during the Cold War, it – like other “sub-regions” of the alliance – boasted an elaborate regional command and control structure. Allied Forces Northern Europe (AFNORTH), the Northern Major Subordinate Command of NATO’s Allied Command Europe, was established in 1952. Led by a British general, the command was based in Kolsås, Norway. Its tasks included the defence arrangements of Norway, Denmark and Northern Germany, as well as monitoring Soviet military movements close to NATO’s northeastern flank. AFNORTH had three major sub-commands: Allied Forces North Norway (NON) in Bodø, Allied Forces South Norway (SONOR) in Stavanger, and Allied Forces Baltic Approaches (BALTOP). The four subordinate regional commands were again in charge of several tactical commands focused on a certain branch (land, sea and air). Unlike other headquarters based on NATO’s geographical division, AFNORTH remained largely unchanged throughout the Cold War period until its dissolution in 1994.¹⁶

The alliance also conducted exercises in defence of its northern areas during the Cold War, reaching the high-water mark in the 1980s. For example, individual allies such as the US, UK, and Canada all regularly took part in exercises defending Norway in all domains.¹⁷ The Soviet forces, in turn, also carried out their own exercises, aiming, for example, to create submarine barriers around critical bottlenecks (such as the GIUK Gap and the Baltic approaches) against allied reinforcements.¹⁸

The challenges concerning NATO’s military planning in Northern Europe were related to the defence of the member states’ geographically challenging areas, especially the coasts and sea areas of northern Norway and the Danish straits. Of particular concern in the Baltic Sea was the potential invasion of Norwegian and Danish territories by the Soviet Union – using the territories of Finland and Sweden to flank Central Europe via the Baltic Sea and the North Sea. Seizing Denmark in a war was an important part of the Soviet plan to

break through NATO’s defences in northern Germany, as part of a dash to the North Sea.¹⁹

NATO’s main defensive effort, particularly in Central Europe, and the ongoing dilemma²⁰ over whether the territories of Norway and Denmark could be kept under alliance control in a crisis, often led to Northern Europe being described as the “forgotten flank”. Norway constantly sought to balance between increasing NATO’s presence in northern Europe and avoiding provoking the Soviet Union, in order to gain more attention in alliance planning.²¹ On the other hand, the reluctance of Norway and Denmark to host permanent NATO bases or nuclear weapons on their soil, as well as their unwillingness to make significant investments in their defence, was repeatedly seen as a limitation on the alliance’s ability to secure Northern Europe, especially in the United States.²²

To compensate for NATO’s limited attention to the Arctic, Norway developed a close defence relationship with the United States. By the 1970s, these ties had resulted in the United States using Norwegian air bases as part of its Co-located Operating Bases programme. Furthermore, in 1981, a US Marine Corps brigade was assigned to Norway, with pre-positioned equipment for 15,000 marines, stored in underground facilities.²³ Overall, NATO’s capability to defend its Northern Flank was significantly better in the latter part of the Cold War than in its early years. It earmarked a maximum of four brigades and 14–16 air squadrons for the defence of Norway, and heavy US naval units maintained a strong and continuous presence in the Northern Atlantic and the Norwegian Sea.²⁴

As NATO’s presence in Northern Europe was partially limited and some of the Nordic countries pursued a policy of neutrality, the balance of power was nevertheless advantageous for the Soviet Union. Moscow sought to hinder NATO’s influence in the Nordic region, and its overall strategy for Northern Europe throughout the Cold War aimed to guarantee the security of Leningrad and open sea routes from Murmansk and the Baltic Sea to the Atlantic. The broader strategic aspirations of both sides remained virtually unchanged throughout the Cold War. Both NATO and the Soviet Union sought to prevent and weaken the

15 Tamnes & Holtmark 2014.

16 Pedlow 2009.

17 Ruiz-Palmer 2019, 69–70.

18 Riste 2007, 232.

19 Donnelly & Petersen 1986.

20 Ibid.

21 On the origins of the Norwegian policy, see Holst 1966. See also Cameron 2024.

22 Petersson & Saxi 2012.

23 Tamnes & Holtmark 2014.

24 Riste 2001, 226.

growth of each other's influence, with the aim of guaranteeing their own freedom of action and security in all circumstances.

1.2 THE POST-COLD WAR YEARS: NATO ENLARGEMENT AND STRATEGIC DECLINE

After the end of the Cold War, the security situation in Europe changed profoundly as the threat of a major war receded. In the absence of the Soviet foe, NATO redefined itself as an organization for security cooperation, whose main objectives included promoting dialogue and cooperation with the former Warsaw Pact countries, as well as managing global conflicts outside its area of responsibility.²⁵ In practice, this meant dismantling military structures built for territorial defence and establishing new relationships through the NATO Partnership for Peace programme, established in 1994. In short, the alliance's main focus shifted from collective defence to crisis management and cooperative security.

NATO's response to the receding military threat also took shape at the political level. Its strategy and core purpose were fundamentally redefined, as the introduction of a broader security agenda and consultative mechanisms with partners overtook deterrence and defence as the most important tasks of the alliance. NATO also sought common ground and areas of cooperation with Russia, which, according to the alliance, now played "a unique role in Euro-Atlantic security".²⁶ In terms of NATO's threat assessment, the threat of conventional warfare effectively petered out and was replaced by the risk of instability in Central and Eastern Europe and its potential implications for Euro-Atlantic security.²⁷

NATO's new strategic outlook deprioritizing collective defence was a significant development for Northern Europe, which all but lost its geostrategic value for Euro-Atlantic defence. On the one hand, it had major implications for the alliance's structures and presence in the region. On the other, it triggered the process of enlargement in which NATO's foothold in Northern Europe grew significantly.

In terms of NATO's command structures, the main command entity in the region – AFNORTH – was disbanded in 1994. Its operations were decentralized to

AFNORTHWEST (Allied Forces Northwestern Europe), which was based in the United Kingdom instead of Norway. This overhaul was followed by subsequent reorganizations of the command structure. In 2003, the alliance agreed on a radical change to its command arrangements. Its operational command was concentrated in three headquarters: Joint Forces Command (JFC) Brunssum in the Netherlands, JFC Naples in Italy, and Joint Command (JC) Lisbon in Portugal (deactivated in 2012). At the same time, the command effectively gave up their responsibility in certain areas. In other words, none of the new commands had a specific focus on Northern Europe, for example.²⁸

The overhaul of the command structure was in line with the alliance's new threat perceptions. Russia was not seen as a threat to NATO allies, and therefore the alliance's previous posture, structure and plans were no longer considered valid. The shift was most remarkable in the Arctic region, where both NATO and Russia reduced their military presence – the US, for instance, retained only a limited presence in Iceland and Greenland – making room for regional cooperation in the form of the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council.²⁹

Following the developments in NATO, Norway and Denmark made gradual shifts in their armed forces, changing their focus from territorial defence towards global crisis management tasks. Finland and Sweden, again, adhered to their respective military non-alignment policies, but gradually increased the Western integration of their defence policy, for example by joining NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994, and participating in NATO peacekeeping operations in the Balkans and Afghanistan.³⁰ Whereas Finland decided to stick to its conscription-based defence model, Sweden initiated major military reforms in the mid-2000s, which led to the practical abolition of the Swedish territorial defence system.

NATO's respective enlargements in 1999 with the accession of Poland, and in 2004, when the Baltic states Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became members of the alliance, significantly reshaped the politico-military geography of Northern Europe, particularly the Baltic Sea region, considerably expanding NATO's area of responsibility (see Figure 2). Although the membership aspirations of the new allies were certainly driven by

25 NATO Strategic Concept 1991.

26 NATO Strategic Concept 1999.

27 Salminen 1993.

28 Pedlow 2009.

29 Huebert 2021 & Zhilina 2011.

30 Petersson & Saxi 2012; Wash 2017.

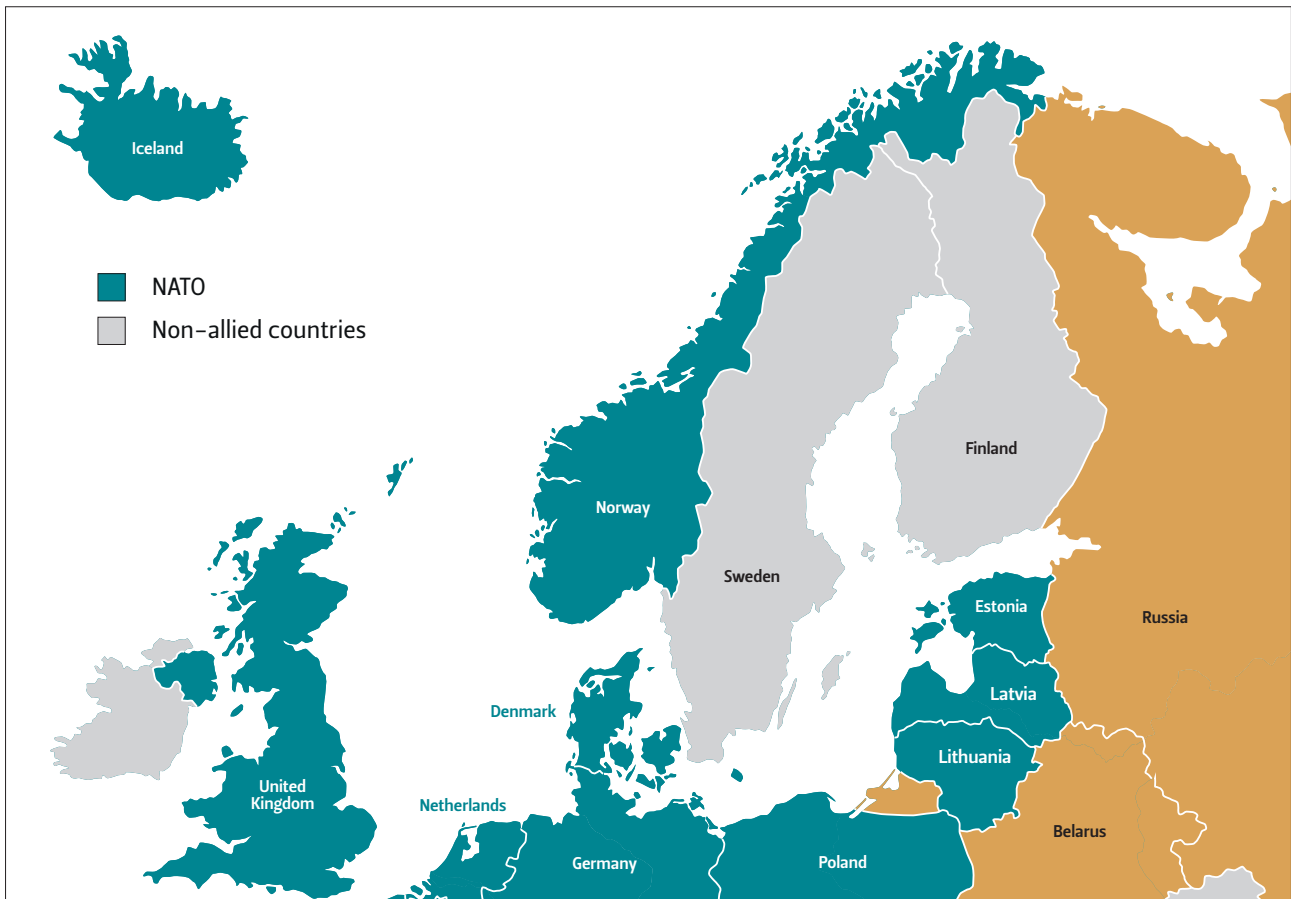


Figure 2. Northern Europe in 2004, NATO and new allies, non-aligned, Russia.

Russia-related security concerns, the broader NATO alliance understood the enlargement in political terms for the most part. The United States, for example, perceived NATO enlargement as an opportunity to consolidate its global influence and democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. The US desire to maintain an open dialogue with Moscow and develop the NATO-Russia partnership indicated that while Washington supported the democratic development of the former Warsaw Pact countries and Soviet republics, its aim was not to build a new deterrence posture against Russia.³¹ Paradoxically, NATO accepted new members but was not really concerned about how to defend them.

Moscow was highly critical of the enlargement, but its response to the process was characterized by restraint. In a meeting with German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in 2004, Putin played down NATO's enlargement, but warned that Russia would closely monitor the deployment of NATO forces and "build our defence and security policy correspondingly".³² In the same

year, however, the Russian Duma issued a resolution called "In Connection with NATO Enlargement", which represented a more hostile attitude: Russian parliamentarians considered that in spite of partnership and cooperation between Russia and NATO on a wide range of issues, "NATO's military doctrine has an offensive character" and "the alliance continues to seek a global presence in different regions of the world and exert its influence there by forceful means, bypassing the UN".³³ Not until the early 2010s did Moscow seriously start to portray the US and NATO as its enemy.³⁴

As new allies, the Baltic states and Poland underscored the centrality of NATO's collective defence and Article 5, actively calling for NATO's increased attention to and presence in Eastern and Central Europe.³⁵ The effort was driven by an assessment of Russia as a recurring security threat. This view was further compounded by incidents such as the 2007 bronze statue controversy in Estonia, the brief war in Georgia

31 Menon & Ruger 2023.

32 New York Times 2004.

33 Resolution of the State Duma 2004.

34 See e.g., McFaul 2019.

35 See e.g., Forsland Widerberg 2015.

in 2008, and Russia's 2009 Zapad military exercise. In November 2009, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski argued at a think tank event in Washington that the Zapad 2009 exercise was an indication of Russia's growing hostility and, as a result, the United States should send troops to Poland. In October of the same year, the prime ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had called on NATO to draw up regional defence plans for the Baltics.³⁶

The accession of Poland and the Baltic states to NATO had not led to a robust allied effort to bolster their security, with the exception of the establishment of the NATO Baltic air-policing mission in 2004. NATO had no forward presence in the region, and the defence of the new allies did not entail regular exercises. Most allies were confident that mere alliance membership was a sufficient threshold against an unlikely Russian invasion – an approach described as *deterrence-by-alliance*.³⁷

The more threatening environment, however, led to somewhat stronger NATO activity in the Baltic Sea region. Most notably, the alliance reportedly drew up a first (non-executable) regional contingency plan against a potential Russian invasion, which was quietly endorsed at the Lisbon Summit in 2010. It not only listed Polish and German ports that could receive allied ships, but also pointed to a formation of nine multinational allied divisions for combat operations in the region. It was the first time since the Cold War that NATO had drawn up a contingency plan to defend Eastern Europe against a potential Russian threat. That said, the plan was less developed and not immediately executable compared to the plans that NATO introduced later in 2015 and particularly in 2023.³⁸

Despite the new plan and increased awareness of Russia's threat potential, NATO did not fundamentally transform its regional exercise practices. Until 2014, allied exercises in the Baltic Sea region primarily served the purpose of preparing regional allies to meet NATO's technical standards, as well as readying them for expeditionary missions outside the alliance's area of responsibility.³⁹ However, new recurring exercises such as the US-led Sabre Strike were established, and the collective defence of the regional allies became an element of allied military drills in the area.⁴⁰

NATO's limited focus on security issues in the Baltic Sea region was a result of the widely shared view in the alliance that Russia should not be treated as a military threat. Indeed, NATO's 2010 strategic concept defined Russia as a strategic partner.⁴¹ This is the backdrop to why certain allies feared that more robust regional efforts, such as drawing up new defence plans, could provoke Russia. Despite NATO's circumspect policies, relations between the alliance and Russia continued to deteriorate steadily during the 2010s. In its 2010 military doctrine, Russia openly identified NATO, its enlargement and increasing efforts as a threat.⁴² Furthermore, Russia heavily critiqued US plans to set up missile defence facilities in Romania and the Czech Republic – a development facilitated by the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2001. Russia also became more assertive militarily. The joint Russian-Belarusian Zapad 2013 exercise attracted a great deal of attention in Northern Europe.⁴³ The same year, Russia carried out a simulated attack against Sweden – a major incident known as the Russian Easter (*Ryska påsken*), which triggered a lively debate on the readiness of Swedish armed forces.

In the early 2010s, there were already signs that an increasingly aggressive Moscow would pose a threat to European security. That said, NATO's reaction to Russia's more assertive actions in the 2010s was cautious. The war in Georgia did not change the prevailing European security paradigms. Nor was NATO in a hurry to establish a robust deterrence posture in the Baltic Sea region despite demands from the regional allies. It was not until the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 that the alliance was forced to seriously consider how it would actually defend the region.

1.3 RUSSIA'S INVASION OF UKRAINE IN 2014: NORTHERN EUROPE RISING IN THE RANKS

NATO-Russia relations deteriorated significantly as a result of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war in Eastern Ukraine. In effect, the Russian aggression led to NATO's return to collective defence. In particular, the need to enhance the alliance's overall readiness and presence in the Baltic Sea and Arctic region came under scrutiny. In other words, Russia's first invasion of Ukraine marked a wake-up

36 Asmus et al. 2010; Dunin 2009.

37 Mälksoo 2024.

38 The Guardian 2010.

39 Banka & Bussmann 2022.

40 See e.g., International Centre for Defence and Security 2013.

41 NATO 2010.

42 Russian Federation 2010.

43 Zdanavičius & Czekaj 2015.

call for NATO and allied military planning, highlighting the need to invest in the collective defence of Europe.

Indeed, 2014 was followed by a series of formative observations and conclusions in Brussels and Washington.⁴⁴ The key takeaway was that NATO could not successfully defend its Baltic allies from a Russian surprise attack. Moscow's demonstrated readiness and ability to use military force, combined with the reduction of US military power in Europe and NATO's inaction in building a regional deterrence and defence posture, had created a power imbalance between NATO and Russia in the Baltic Sea region. The military shortcomings of the United States and NATO were verified in a series of war games conducted by the RAND Corporation in 2014–2016. The outcome seriously undercut the credibility of NATO deterrence, showing how Russian forces could even reach Tallinn and Riga in about 60 hours, and how recapturing the lost territory would be extremely difficult and costly.⁴⁵

Part of this sobering realization of the Baltic Sea security landscape was NATO's concern about how Russia's air and naval defence assets could create an "A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial)" bubble,⁴⁶ supposedly making the Baltics difficult to defend. Russia's use of ballistic and cruise missiles in the Kaliningrad and Leningrad military districts, coupled with use of the Baltic Fleet and Belarusian territories in a state of war, was seen as a direct challenge to NATO's freedom of action and ability to support its allies in a long-term regional war.⁴⁷ However, the actual seriousness of the threat was soon questioned by various analysts.⁴⁸

The first Russian invasion of Ukraine finally galvanized NATO into action. In September 2014 at NATO's Summit in Wales, the alliance introduced a host of new measures that enhanced its collective defence. The deterioration of the European security environment revitalized NATO's sense of purpose, while the alliance was slowly running down its mission in Afghanistan, which had been its main focus for more than a decade. NATO was now shifting its focus back to collective defence.

Unsurprisingly, there were various views within the alliance regarding the most appropriate response to Russia's actions. Two main options were entertained: stationing allied troops on the eastern

flank in the form of forward presence or, alternatively, developing a readiness concept with a focus on the availability of troops. Germany, for example, warned that deploying allied troops to the Baltics would provoke Russia and violate the NATO–Russia Founding Act. The Baltic countries and Poland again underscored that forward presence would bolster deterrence and would not violate the founding act, which they considered more or less null and void due to Russia's aggressive measures.⁴⁹

Eventually, NATO adopted the Readiness Action Plan (RAP), which consisted of various assurance and adaptation measures. As part of the initiative, NATO established the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) comprising 5,000–20,000 soldiers in high readiness, constituting the "spearhead" of NATO's rapid deployment capacity. The plan also included a readiness target according to which member states should have a total of 30 army battalions, 30 combat aircraft squadrons and 30 warships ready for NATO operations within 30 days by 2020. These measures certainly marked a successful short-term adaptation to a new security environment. However, the decisions were only an opening salvo when it came to NATO's long-term adaptation to the demands of the deteriorated security environment. The long-term challenge for NATO was the reorientation back to territorial defence, involving fundamental questions such as how to move large force numbers and equipment across the European territory facilitated by the necessary logistical support.⁵⁰

Crucially, NATO's efforts were supported by American deterrence and assurance measures. In June 2014, during his visit to Poland, President Barack Obama announced the US effort to deploy troops and equipment to the Baltic states and Poland. The objective of Washington's actions was to convince both Russia and NATO's most exposed allies about the US commitment to the defence of its allies, as enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.⁵¹ The American measures took the form of the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) (known as the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) since 2017), which allowed the US to bolster materiel stockpiling, improve infrastructure, and increase regional exercise activities.

The Wales Summit was only the first milestone in NATO's adaptation process. The alliance's

44 Vanhanen et al. 2023.

45 Shlapak & Johnson, 2016.

46 Gormley, Erickson & Yuan 2014.

47 Stoicescu & Praks 2016.

48 Dalsjö et al. 2019.

49 Pezard et al. 2017.

50 Ringsmose & Rynning 2017.

51 White House 2014.

Warsaw Summit in 2016 further cemented the return to collective defence: among other things, the allies decided to deploy reinforced battalions (Enhanced Forward Presence, eFP) to the Baltic states and Poland, which were declared operational in 2017. The four multinational battalions were led by the UK (Estonia), Canada (Latvia), Germany (Lithuania), and the US (Poland). In addition to infantry units, they were armed with anti-tank and anti-aircraft equipment, possessed reconnaissance capabilities, and were equipped with pioneer and maintenance capabilities, making them capable of independent combat for a limited period of time if necessary.⁵² The decision had noteworthy significance: for the first time, the alliance had established a (limited) defence posture on its new eastern flank.

From an analytical point of view, the battalion-sized contingents were designed to act as a 'tripwire', triggering an immediate allied response to a military aggression against their host nations.⁵³ In other words, the relatively small units were not capable of repelling a Russian invasion by themselves, but their deterrence value rested on NATO's resolve to deploy significant reinforcements.⁵⁴ The basic, bleak idea of tripwire defence was encapsulated by Thomas Schelling as early as the 1960s: "they [troops] can die heroically, dramatically, and in a manner that guarantees that the action cannot stop there".⁵⁵

Indeed, many allies are of the opinion that the limited allied presence on NATO's eastern flank should dissuade Russia from testing the alliance. Regardless of the contingents' small size, some analysts considered it a cost-efficient response to a possible rapid development by Russia. Moreover, the contingent model also followed NATO's policy of 'transparency' and 'tailored responses' vis-à-vis Russia, as it aimed to avoid provoking Russia while defining a minimum level of forces deemed suitable for deterrence given Russia's behaviour.⁵⁶ Critics of the model noted, however, that even if the whole eFP in Eastern Europe were to be attacked by conventional Russian troops, this alone would not necessarily ensure an immediate escalation of the war, duly contesting the eFP's deterrent value and its heavy reliance on reinforcements.⁵⁷

NATO's decisions in 2014–2016 to strengthen its regional defence and deterrence nevertheless alleviated allies' immediate fears of a possible surprise attack by Russia. The limited forward defence posture was also supported by the introduction of new operations plans – the so-called Graduated Response Plans – as well as the roll-out of several Force Integration Units to foster collaboration between national forces and the high-readiness elements of the NATO High Readiness Forces (NRF) in times of military-political crises. The alliance also established divisional-level headquarters in the region, capable of commanding larger forces. Overall, NATO's efforts were markedly defensive and, as insisted by certain allies, in accordance with the principles of the NATO–Russia Founding Act. However, the limited posture was not only due to fear of provoking Russia. Regional allies also had inadequate facilities to host a significant allied presence on their respective soils.⁵⁸

As NATO's planning and preparedness evolved, more challenges concerning the European defence arrangements became apparent. An important realization was that the Baltic Sea region could not be treated in isolation from the wider European security landscape. In other words, the security of the Baltic Sea area was intimately linked with the security of other regions, particularly with the Northern Atlantic maritime area and the European Arctic. Indeed, the deterioration of the European security milieu propelled the traditional Arctic security dynamics back to the forefront. For the US to send reinforcements to Europe, NATO would have to secure the Northern Atlantic Sea routes. This again necessitated shifting the alliance's focus back to the Arctic Sea and land areas.

As pointed out in the earlier section, after the end of the Cold War, the Arctic had ceased to be a focus area for NATO's planning, which again led to a significant deterioration in the alliance's regional situational awareness and military posture.⁵⁹ As a result of Russia's increased threat potential and the restoration of its Bastion Strategy, NATO reacknowledged the increased strategic importance of the European Arctic and the North Atlantic more broadly. The United States and the United Kingdom, in particular, began to spearhead an allied military presence and exercises in the region.⁶⁰

52 NATO 2016.

53 NATO has never used the term in its official communications.

54 Hagström-Frisell et al. 2019.

55 Schelling 1966.

56 Stoicescu & Järvenpää 2019.

57 Zapfe 2017.

58 Lanoszka, Leuprecht & Moens 2020.

59 Tamnes 2018; Flanagan 2018.

60 NATO 2018.

Concrete examples of NATO's return to the Arctic included the recommissioning of the US airbase in Keflavik, Iceland, Washington's decision to re-establish the Second Fleet to secure North Atlantic maritime traffic, and the introduction of NATO Joint Forces Command (JFC) in Norfolk, Virginia, in 2018 with a particular focus on NATO's northern direction. The US also forward deployed over 300 marines to Norway for a temporary rotational mission in 2016. NATO again responded by increasing the tempo of its naval operations as well as by expanding allied naval exercises.

As a further indication of the reinvigorated allied approach, the bi-annual Cold Response exercises in Norway were increased in size, and NATO also held its high-visibility Trident Juncture exercise in Norway in 2018. In terms of scale, the exercise was the largest regional military exercise since the end of the Cold War, including all NATO allies as well as then partners Finland and Sweden.⁶¹ The United States also sent the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman to the exercise as a sign of restored capabilities. It was the first time in nearly 30 years that a US aircraft carrier had sailed in the Arctic, sending a strong political message about the increased awareness of the importance of the North Atlantic region.⁶² In contrast to its activities in the Baltic Sea region, NATO did not establish forward presence in the European Arctic. Furthermore, discussing Arctic security issues within the alliance proved difficult, as certain allies did not consider NATO the right platform for such discussions.

For the militarily non-aligned Finland and Sweden, the events of 2014 and the consequent increase in the strategic importance of the defence of the Baltic Sea and the Arctic led to closer defence cooperation with the alliance, as Helsinki and Stockholm aligned their respective defence policies with the NATO-centric European defence system.⁶³ The development was based on their need to bolster their own security by expanding the scope of military cooperation to potential crisis and wartime collaboration. Finland and Sweden duly acknowledged that they could not isolate themselves from a potential regional conflict.

NATO, for its part, identified a need to develop dialogue and interoperability with its two most important partners, strategically located at the intersection of the Baltic Sea area and the European

Arctic. At NATO's Wales Summit in 2014, Finland and Sweden were granted the increased EOP (Enhanced Opportunities Partner) status, which in practice meant increased security policy interaction between Finland, Sweden and NATO, as well as more frequent participation in NATO's military exercises. At the same summit, Finland and Sweden also signed a NATO host-nation agreement with the aim of facilitating allied activity on their respective territories. Although Finland and Sweden formally remained outside NATO, their closer defence cooperation with the alliance and the United States blurred the lines of military non-alignment and strengthened their strategic role as an integral part of NATO's defence in Northern Europe.⁶⁴

The security paradigm shift that began in 2014 fundamentally changed the military-strategic realities of Northern Europe. Suddenly, the Baltic Sea area and the European Arctic were attracting considerable allied attention, as the regions were seen as potential NATO-Russia flashpoints. The alliance was forced to think how it would actually defend its expanded area of responsibility in the Northern European theatre. Indeed, Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 led to the first serious effort by NATO to establish a regional deterrence and defence posture as part of its broader adaptation process driven by Russia's increased threat potential.

1.4 RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE IN 2022: NATO ENLARGEMENT AND NORTHERN EUROPE AS THE FOCAL POINT OF EURO-ATLANTIC STABILITY

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 profoundly shaped the European security landscape, including the Northern European security milieu. Whereas the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 caught NATO off guard, this time the transatlantic alliance was alert. In response to Russia's attack, NATO activated its graduated response plans and deployed, for the first time in its history, high-readiness elements of the NATO Response Force to an allied nation – Romania – in a deterrence and defence role. Furthermore, as part of the so-called enhanced Vigilance Activities (eVA), NATO also decided to establish four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia in March 2022.⁶⁵

61 31 participating countries, 50,000 participants, 150 aircraft, 70 ships and more than 10,000 vehicles.

62 Mikkola 2019.

63 Iso-Markku & Pesu 2024; Pesu & Iso-Markku 2024.

64 Chivvis et al. 2016; Pesu 2017; Vanhanen et al. 2023.

65 NATO 2022a.

In addition to NATO's measures, the United States supplemented the alliance's efforts by strengthening its military presence in Europe. Immediately after the Russian invasion, the US deployed 20,000 additional troops to Europe, bringing the total number of American troops on the old continent close to 100,000. On the sidelines of the NATO Summit in Madrid in June 2022, President Biden announced the deployment of additional reinforcements to Europe. The most significant decisions included the introduction of a permanent command element in Poland, the deployment of two naval destroyers to Spain, the transfer of a mechanized brigade to Romania, and the deployment of two F-35 fighter squadrons to Britain. In addition, the existing troops in the Baltics, Germany and Italy were strengthened.

The security policy effects of the war also spread quickly to Finland and Sweden, where public opinion and political parties abruptly turned in favour of NATO membership. In addition to public pressure, transformed perceptions regarding the Russian threat potential were a key driver behind the Finnish and Swedish membership bids.⁶⁶ Ukraine's ability to resist the invasion and thwart Russia's goal of changing the Ukrainian leadership were conducive to conditions in which the political leaders of NATO allies welcomed the idea of expanding the alliance. The landscape in the alliance was in other words amenable to receiving two new members. After brief parliamentary processes in the aspirant countries, both Finland and Sweden submitted their applications to NATO in May 2022, and NATO officially invited them to become observer members of the alliance at its Summit in Madrid in summer 2022. Finland was admitted to the alliance on 4 April 2023, whereas Sweden joined NATO a year later on 8 March 2024.

NATO's Summit in Madrid became another milestone in the alliance's adaptation process to collective defence, as the allies agreed on a fundamental change in NATO's deterrence and defence posture by setting a new baseline for its activities. The decisions included bolstering the forward defence of the alliance by strengthening the size of the eFP battlegroups from battalion to brigade level "when and where required". NATO also agreed on a new force model consisting of 800,000 troops, 300,000 of whom will be in high readiness – a significant increase from the previous NRF model of 40,000 troops. The new model, as well

as the strengthened forward defence posture, marked a shift in NATO's defence strategy from the tripwire approach towards a *deterrence-by-denial* model, the purpose of which would be to immediately inflict heavy military losses on a potential aggressor and thus prevent attempts to conquer the territories of NATO countries.⁶⁷

The change that took place in Madrid was driven not only by recent events but also by NATO's new military strategy and the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) military concept – adopted in 2019 and 2020, respectively – both of which guided NATO's return to the task of deterrence and defence (see Chapter 4). That said, the agreed transformation in NATO's military strategy also responded to continuous and long-lasting calls from allies. The Russian invasion had laid bare the shortcomings of NATO's post-2014 strategy, which rested on a limited presence. For example, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas had strongly criticized NATO's tripwire logic and the prevailing plans to defend the Baltic states against Russian aggression. According to Kallas, the Ukrainian example demonstrated that if NATO were to let the enemy take over the Estonian territory without repelling the aggression outright, Estonia would be wiped off the world map in a war.⁶⁸

NATO's efforts to strengthen defence and deterrence continued at the 2023 Vilnius Summit, building on the decisions taken in Madrid. The most important decision buttressing a more robust collective defence posture included the adoption of NATO's three new regional defence plans, covering NATO's northern and Atlantic regions, the Baltic and Central Europe, the Mediterranean and the rest of southern Europe. Besides concretely laying out how to defend allies against military aggression, the plans and their requirements will drive NATO's force development in the coming years.⁶⁹ NATO is also taking its first steps towards a genuine forward defence posture on its eastern flank. Germany, for example, aims to permanently station 4,800 troops in Lithuania by 2027 – a potentially major change to the previous rotational presence established in 2016.

To conclude, the events launched in 2022 represent a major paradigm shift in the role of Northern Europe as part of the broader upheaval in Euro-Atlantic

67 NATO Madrid Summit Resolution 2022.

68 Financial Times 2022.

69 NATO 2023.

66 Haavisto 2022; Vanhanen 2022; Pesu & Iso-Markku 2024.

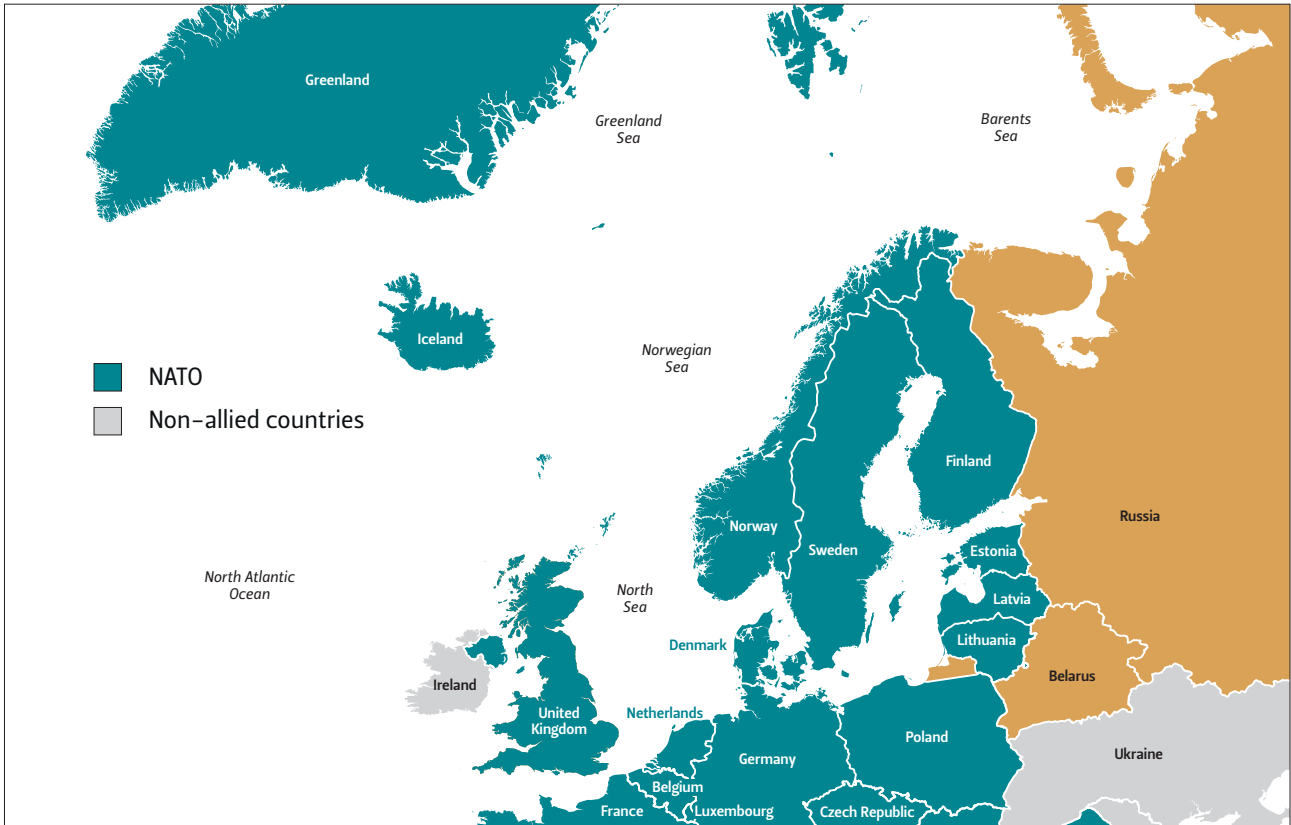


Figure 3. Map of NATO in 2024

security.⁷⁰ Although NATO has been slowly restoring its military deterrence in Northern Europe since 2014, the NATO membership of Finland and Sweden means that the region's security policy dynamics are undergoing the greatest change since the end of the Cold War, with all the Western and democratic powers of the Baltic Sea and Arctic countries now members of NATO. This will not only open up new avenues for allied regional cooperation in various bi- and multilateral formats such as NORDEFO, but also place demands on the alliance and its posture in Northern Europe.⁷¹ As part of the adaptation process, the alliance needs to consider, for example, how to involve the Northern European theatre in its regional plans and how to build sufficient regional command-and-control arrangements.⁷² It must also ponder how to integrate the considerable military capabilities of Finland and Sweden into collective defence in the region and beyond. Importantly, Russia will not remain passive but will likely try to undercut NATO's efforts through

grey zone measures, military sabre-rattling, and even nuclear signalling.

As such, Northern Europe can no longer be perceived as a side flank of NATO, but as one of the focal points of Euro-Atlantic security. Northern Europe, consisting of the Baltic Sea region, the European Arctic and, increasingly, the Northern Sea region, is a vital geopolitical interface between NATO and Russia, and a potential flashpoint for confrontation. Furthermore, Northern Europe will be a key driver of and arena for NATO's deterrence and defence efforts. Ensuring the stability and safety of the region is crucial for the whole Euro-Atlantic area.

70 Vanhanen 2023.

71 See e.g., Pesu 2023.

72 See e.g., Friis & Tamnes 2024.

2. AN ALLIANCE OF STRATEGIC DIVERGENCIES: CONTEXTUALIZING NORTHERN EUROPE AND FINLAND IN NATO DECISION-MAKING

Joel Linnainmäki

NATO IS BOTH a military alliance and a multilateral political organization where decisions are made by consensus. As a new member state, Finland needs to build a strong understanding of the political dynamics of the alliance in order to drive its national interest in decision-making processes. This requires discerning the competing threat perceptions and national interests within NATO, as well as identifying the elastic coalitions and country groupings that seek to influence policy and resource allocations. This chapter will analyze the political dynamics of NATO by looking at the alliance's decision-making structures, how members seek to influence policy and the objects of bargaining, mainly where, when and how the alliance spends its time and resources. The chapter will also position Finland in the alliance by analyzing how these different factors might affect NATO's approach to the Nordic region and what implications this has for Finland.

2.1 POLITICAL AND MILITARY DECISION- MAKING IN NATO

The North Atlantic Council (NAC) is the ultimate consultative forum and decision-making body in the alliance. The NAC is chaired by the secretary general and can meet at the level of ambassadors, ministers, or heads of state and governments, as required. Crucially, it is the only organizational body mentioned in the North Atlantic Treaty and the only one that can mandate the creation of new subordinate bodies.⁷³ NATO summits, by heads of state and government, provide strategic guidance and serve as a forum for making key decisions, such as, for example, inviting new member states into the alliance. Summit preparations and the implementation of summit decisions requires an extensive policy process, which includes the civilian and military committees and working groups as well as the national delegations. Summit decisions are ordinarily made public as declarations or communiqués.

NATO's organization is divided into civilian and military branches. On the civilian side, the international staff supports and advises national delegations and NATO committees in decision-making and executes on their decisions. The civilian component also includes the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), which is responsible for nuclear matters in the alliance. The military component consists of the Military Committee (MC), two strategic commands (ACO/SHAPE and ACT) and an evolving military structure. The Military Committee advises the North Atlantic Council on all military matters. At its highest level, it consists of the national Chiefs of Defence and is supported by an international military staff. The two strategic commands are Allied Command Operations (ACO/SHAPE), which is responsible for turning political goals into military plans as well as force generation and military operations, and Allied Command Transformation (ACT), responsible for defence planning and capability development.⁷⁴ Under these structures, NATO has numerous committees and agencies.

Member states are the key policy entrepreneurs and agenda-setters in both structures, whereas the international staff exercises relatively limited autonomy. However, in recent decades, NATO's institutional actors, such as its international staff and the secretary general, have gained more prominence and agency. They can influence decision-making by convening actors, setting agendas, delegating issues, facilitating information sharing, delaying decisions and moderating or facilitating negotiations.⁷⁵ For example, secretary general Jens Stoltenberg played an important role in facilitating discussions between Finland, Sweden and Turkey during their NATO membership process. International staff members, on the other hand, chair committee work, and, in this capacity, they can help to direct or shift the committee's focus on particular issues through tools such as agenda papers, facilitation and the drafting of minutes.⁷⁶ That said, member states

73 Weaver 2021, 22–23.

74 Weaver 2021, 22–23.

75 Johnston 2017, 28–31.

76 Mayer 2023, 158–159.

have been and will likely remain highly resistant to granting international staff extensive independence.

The overall balance between civilian–political and military decision–makers in the alliance has varied over time. At times, the Military Committee has been in the driver’s seat, while at other times its influence on the alliance’s strategy and policy goals has been limited.⁷⁷ After the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, the allied military leadership took the lead in reorienting NATO away from out–of–area expeditionary operations towards traditional deterrence and defence. As pointed out in the previous chapter, in 2019 allied Chiefs of Defence adopted a new Military Strategy, followed by two implementation documents, the Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro–Atlantic Area (DDA) in 2020, and the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept in 2021.⁷⁸ Finally, after the Russian full–scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the alliance agreed on a new Strategic Concept in Madrid, which aligned the alliance’s political and military objectives. For now, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has re–aligned political and military leadership on policy priorities.

In addition to formal civilian and military structures, informal groupings and consultations are integral to NATO’s decision–making. National delegations, located at the NATO headquarters in Brussels, have a central role in facilitating informal meetings and in mapping allies’ policy preferences. Some of the key country groupings include the E3 (France, Germany, Italy), the Quint and the Friends of Europe (France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States), the Bucharest Nine (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia), the Southern Quartet (France, Italy, Portugal and Spain), and the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). These groups help to enable discussion, information sharing, cohesion, and negotiation before and during decision–making.⁷⁹

All decisions in NATO are made by consensus, rather than by voting.⁸⁰ This puts emphasis on national sovereignty and the lead role of the member states in decision–making. Consensus is not a juridical requirement, but rather a deeply rooted norm that has been an integral part of NATO’s culture since the birth of the

alliance. Military and defence policies are core areas of national sovereignty, and as such no member state is willing to cede ultimate authority to a supranational multilateral organization. This ethos is also reflected in the formulation of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which requires each member state to decide how they will react to an armed attack against another member state.⁸¹

On a day–to–day basis, consensus is built through careful and continuous formal and informal consultation at all levels. This is more commonly known as NATO’s “habit of consultation”. Consultations can and do lead to quid pro quo exchanges between member states on different policy items. Member states can also “agree to disagree” on issues, if needed.⁸² More commonly, however, agenda items that face opposition from one or more member states are either buried or go through one or more rounds of revision until they are acceptable to all members.⁸³

The system has multiple benefits. Firstly, it means that once a decision is reached, member states are committed to the agreement. Secondly, consensus fosters internal cohesion in a large alliance, which is a critical requirement for effectively responding to external threats. Thirdly, it reflects the equality and sovereignty of member states, regardless of their size, and forces large countries to consider the interests of smaller states.

The balance of consultations on key issues and the overall strategy has shifted from time to time between the United States and Europe. For example, during NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan, the alliance became “overwhelmingly American”, as consultations took place, but had no meaningful impact on American policy. The debate reflected the disparity between American and European capabilities and the long–running debate on burden–sharing, which is still ongoing.⁸⁴

For Finland and the Northern European member states, the key implications of NATO’s structures and its decision–making norms of consensus and consultation are the importance of consensus–building, the prioritization of key issues and national interests, and the ability to respond quickly and early to issues arising at different levels of the organization. Finland does not have the resources, interests, capacity or political

77 Gade & Hilde 2014, 159.

78 Ringsmose & Rynning 2021, 148.

79 Blessing et al. 2021, 10–11.

80 With the exception of the acceptance of Capability Target packages in the NATO Defense Planning Process (NDPP), which follows a ‘consensus minus one’ rule.

81 Michel 2014, 107–109.

82 Weaver 2021, 26.

83 Michel 2014, 108–109.

84 Rynning 2019, 148.

capital to move policy on all issues. Rather, it must select those issues that are most important to its national interests.

2.2 INTRA-ALLIANCE DIPLOMACY: THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGIC DIVERGENCES

Success in a diverse alliance requires careful consensus-building among 32 allies. The key diverging factors among allies have often been related to threat perceptions and strategy. These factors directly affect NATO’s planning and are thus ultimately discussions about how NATO and its members prioritize resources.⁸⁵ This section will classify diverging threat perceptions and strategic divergences within the alliance. These ideal type categories are not uniform lobbying groups present in the give-and-take of everyday diplomacy in Brussels, but they help to outline the key political interests and concerns that affect debates within the alliance and to situate Finland within this context. This section will also discuss how the fear of US abandonment influences alliance cohesion and NATO policy.

NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept begins by stating that its members are “bound together by common values: individual liberty, human rights, democracy and the rule of law”.⁸⁶ Common values are important for the internal cohesion of a political organization. Yet the relationship between NATO’s values and priorities has always been uneasy. Security interests have often temporarily trumped values when the two have clashed. This is understandable given NATO’s nature as a military

alliance.⁸⁷ Threat perceptions influence NATO’s strategy and policies through intra-member contestation.

2.2.1 Diverging threat perceptions between NATO member states

One way to understand alliance politics within NATO is by assessing how member states perceive threats to Euro-Atlantic security. In February 2022, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine united NATO countries in their perception of Russia as a threat. In the 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO directly identifies Russia as “the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area”.⁸⁸ However, for much of the post-Cold War period, allies have had very different perceptions of the types of threats that NATO should be prepared to counter. These differences are likely to resurface in the long run, once concerns regarding Russia’s war against Ukraine subside.

National threat perceptions in NATO are generally closely tied to geography.⁸⁹ Members can be placed into three analytical categories according to these factors. Countries on NATO’s northern and eastern flanks view Russia as NATO’s primary long-term security challenge. Countries on NATO’s southern flank emphasize broader security concerns emanating from the south, such as terrorism, migration and energy security. Finally, western and central European NATO allies generally balance various threats, including Russia, with their broader interests.

85 Kunz 2021, 160–161.

86 NATO 2022c, 3.

87 Dijk & Sloan 2020, 1015.

88 NATO 2022c, 4.

89 Jakobsen & Ringsmose 2018, 46.

Divergences among allies on threats and strategic focus



Figure 4. Divergences among allies on threats and strategic focus

With Finland and Sweden in the alliance, NATO will for the first time have a genuine northeastern flank, connecting the eastern front with the traditional northern flank.⁹⁰ This group consists of countries closest to Russia, with long histories of tension, conflict, and even occupation. The group can be divided into northern member states Finland and Sweden – and to some extent Norway – and eastern members, such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Bulgaria, which are active in the Bucharest Nine format. These countries have an enduring perception of Russia as their primary security threat. This leads them to emphasize close relations with the United States and Article 5 as NATO's core function. They want NATO to commit to building credible deterrence and defence both in the near future and for the long-term. On the other hand, these countries differ in how they approach the Russian threat in rhetorical terms and whether they act as security providers or security consumers in the alliance. They also compete for the resources and attention of NATO's larger member states, particularly the United States.

The southern flank consists of Mediterranean member states, such as France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Turkey. These disparate countries emphasize asymmetrical security threats emanating from the Mediterranean Sea region, especially terrorism, migration and energy security. They are currently focused on the Russian war in Ukraine, but in the long term they want NATO to find a balance between their concerns and those of the northern and eastern flank. Having said that, they are by no means a coherent group. There is a deep historical rivalry between Turkey and Greece, for example, and more recently tensions between Ankara and the rest of the alliance regarding Sweden's NATO accession. However, it should be noted that NATO, as a military alliance, has a limited mandate and capacity to respond to asymmetrical threats, many of which would be better addressed under EU auspices.⁹¹

Finally, Western and Central European member states, such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, have diverse threat perceptions, balancing European and global concerns. For example, the UK and the Netherlands are traditionally transatlanticist countries whose policy agendas often align with US ambitions. In addition to

the Russian threat, they also understand the Southern allies' concerns. On the other hand, they also wish to commit the United States to European security by having NATO take a tougher stance towards China. After the end of the Cold War, they largely reoriented their armed forces towards crisis management and expeditionary operations, such as in Afghanistan.

The diverging threat perceptions among allies have been one of the durable fault lines in the alliance, particularly since the post-Cold War round of enlargement and the widening of NATO's agenda beyond deterrence and defence.⁹² NATO's 360-degree approach to security reflects these disparate threat perceptions by outlining the alliance's commitment to defending the security of all member states. The 360-degree approach was first mentioned in 2015 by NATO defence ministers and later expanded upon in the 2016 Warsaw Summit. The Bucharest Nine and Southern Quartet countries both played an active role in the negotiations. The result was a compromise between countries wanting to deter Russia and those concerned about terrorism.⁹³

Several conclusions can be drawn from these categorizations. Firstly, proximity to threat matters, as it directly affects the way in which member states seek to prioritize NATO's limited resources. This is particularly relevant for Finland, which, being closer to Russia, feels the threat acutely. Secondly, while groupings like these are first and foremost analytical categories rather than formal interest coalitions, they also reflect real long-term divergences among the allies. If left unaddressed, these differences can impact alliance cohesion. This underscores the importance of solidarity and the need for compromise among member states. Thirdly, while threat perceptions might diverge, they can also overlap: for example, Russia's activities in West Africa and its links to military coups have contributed to the destabilization of the neighbourhood on the southern flank. Another example is Ukraine's need for solidarity from the Global South in its fight against Russia, which is also a high priority for eastern flank countries.

90 Pesu & Paukkunen 2022.

91 EU-NATO cooperation, on the other hand, is hindered by tensions between Cyprus and Turkey.

92 Tardy 2021, 32. See also Tardy 2022.

93 Calmels 2020.

2.2.2 Strategic divergences between NATO member states

NATO's internal politics can also be analyzed through strategic divergences among allies. In the context of the post-Cold War alliance, it is possible to identify at least three categories of allies by their strategic priorities: those who prioritize deterrence against Russia, those who advocate a greater global role for NATO, and those who favour retaining the current status quo. As with the threat-based coalitions, these groupings are not uniform interest groups, but present useful ideal types for understanding internal debates and tensions within NATO.

Deterrence-minded allies prioritize NATO's role in deterring and defending against external conventional threats, mainly Russia. They include Poland and the Baltic states, for example. Global-minded allies want NATO to play a global role, especially vis-à-vis China, in addition to the alliance's defence tasks in Europe. These countries, such as the UK, the United States and the Netherlands, have global interests and thus see themselves as having global roles. Finally, status quo-minded allies are not fully on board with NATO having a global dimension, nor with focusing solely on collective deterrence against Russia. These countries, such as Germany, Greece, Spain, and Turkey, have disparate interests.⁹⁴ For the moment, Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has tilted the allies towards deterring the Russian threat in Europe. However, internal differences over strategy have always been present in the alliance and are likely to resurface in the long run. Understanding the context of these debates is therefore important.⁹⁵

After the end of the Cold War, NATO drifted away from deterrence to crisis management and global out-of-area operations. After the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions of Ukraine, it shifted its focus back to conventional deterrence in Europe. This strategic shift can also be traced in the alliance's 1991, 1999 and 2010 strategic concepts. NATO's geographic focus and perception of security challenges widened during this time from military threats in Europe to asymmetric threats, such as the global war on terror.⁹⁶ In the 2010 Lisbon Strategic Concept, the alliance firmly embraced a role as a global "crisis manager".⁹⁷

However, not all member states saw this strategic shift as a positive development. Strategic rifts emerged between the United States and other allies over the extent of NATO's involvement in Afghanistan, and particularly over the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. When it came to Afghanistan, views differed within the alliance on how extensively NATO could and should be involved in a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban. The rift over the Iraq war went much deeper. Key allies, such as France and Germany, opposed the US-led invasion. The United States circumvented NATO by forming a coalition of the willing, in which some NATO countries, such as the United Kingdom, participated.⁹⁸

Russia's 2008 war against Georgia gave the eastern European allies, who had always been wary of Russia, fresh impetus to demand the alliance to refocus on deterring Russia. However, the conflict was not enough to convince most allies of the resurgence of the Russian threat, and the alliance was still tied up with the expeditionary ISAF operation in Afghanistan until 2014.⁹⁹ As examined in the previous chapter, Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea triggered a plethora of reforms and initiatives designed to reassure eastern flank members.¹⁰⁰ However, it was not until 2022 that the alliance's strategic concept, military concept and allies' threat perceptions were fully aligned on deterring Russian aggression.

Despite the current Russia-driven cohesion, long-term strategic differences between the allies remain. Allies on the northern and eastern flank seek to anchor NATO, and especially the nuclear allies (the US, the UK, and France), to their security. They are concerned that once the war in Ukraine eventually ends, NATO will again lose focus on its collective defence tasks. Meanwhile, the US and traditional transatlanticist allies, such as the UK, have a long-term interest in concentrating on the evolving competition with China, as well as on other global security roles. Finally, many Western and Southern European allies do not face acute pressure from Russia but may not want NATO to play a large global role vis-à-vis China either. For Finland, the challenge will be to maintain NATO's focus on deterrence and Russia in the long term, while also accommodating the United States as it increasingly turns its attention to the Indo-Pacific region. The key

94 Jakobsen & Ringsmose 2018, 42-43.

95 Blessing et al. 2021, 4.

96 Jakobsen & Ringsmose 2018, 42.

97 Noetzel & Schreer 2012.

98 Noetzel & Schreer 2012, 214.

99 Noetzel & Schreer 2012, 216.

100 Calmels 2020, 425.

will be to uphold pragmatic and good relations with all key actors, while continuing to show that Finland is a security producer both in its immediate neighbourhood and in Europe more broadly.

2.3 COMPROMISES OVER EXTERNAL THREATS: TERRORISM, RUSSIA AND CHINA IN THE STRATEGIC CONCEPT

The political compromises and deal-making associated with the maintenance of unity and purpose in an alliance of 32 members are nowhere more visible than in the strategic concepts. Since its inception, the alliance has adopted eight concepts. Strategic concepts present the alliance's assessment of its security environment and provide strategic guidance for the political and military structures on adaptation to external threats. Terrorism and Russia have been the two main threats faced by NATO in the 2000s. In recent years the rise of China has been the topic of a growing discussion. This section will analyze the development of these three key external threats in the alliance's strategic concepts and summit communiqués since the end of the Cold War.

2.3.1 Terrorism and the 360-degree approach to security

In the 1990s, terrorism was not yet a priority for the alliance. It was recognized as a threat, but alongside other asymmetric threats such as organized crime and uncontrolled movement of people. These threats were framed as falling under Article 4 consultations of the North Atlantic Treaty, rather than as a matter of collective defence under Article 5.¹⁰¹ On the whole, terrorism was seen primarily as an internal matter for member states, and the issue was not discussed much within the alliance.¹⁰²

This changed after the 9/11 attacks against the US, which led the allies to activate Article 5 collective defence for the first, and so far only time in history. In response, the United States launched its Global War on Terrorism in 2001 with Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. After the Taliban's withdrawal from Afghanistan, the UN Security Council mandated

the creation of a multinational International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), initially separate from both NATO and the American-led Operation Enduring Freedom.¹⁰³ In 2003, NATO agreed to take over responsibility for ISAF, formalizing the alliance's role in the war on terror. However, the division between NATO-led ISAF and American-led OEF persisted.¹⁰⁴

NATO was never entirely comfortable with having terrorism as a core task, however. The allies disagreed about the nature of NATO's role in Afghanistan (counterinsurgency vs. reconstruction) and about burden-sharing. In 2006, NATO heads of state updated the alliance's military guidance to better reflect the threat of terrorism by adopting the Comprehensive Political Guidance (CPG). This set out NATO's military priorities for intelligence, planning and capabilities related to terrorism. By this time, terrorism was seen as a possible Article 5 threat against the alliance. The CPG was a compromise between those member states most committed to the operation in Afghanistan, and those that disagreed on the need to update the alliance's Strategic Concept. By the time the allies finally agreed on a new Strategic Concept in 2010, internal cohesion on the war on terrorism had waned, and the 2008 Russian war on Georgia had reignited the debate on traditional deterrence in Europe among eastern flank allies.¹⁰⁵

The 2010 Strategic Concept reflected these compromises and disagreements. Instead of setting clear priorities for the alliance, it further widened its core tasks and threat perceptions. The Concept defined terrorism as a clear threat that needs to be deterred and defended against. At the same time, it failed to provide clear guidance on how this should be accomplished. Instead of Afghanistan-style operations, the emphasis was placed on detection, analysis, consultation, and the training of local forces, as well as creating new partnerships for counterterrorism, including, notably, with Russia.¹⁰⁶

After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the debate shifted again. At the Warsaw Summit in 2016, NATO adopted a 360-degree approach to its security, which reflected both the eastern allies' concerns about Russia and the southern allies' disquiet about asymmetric threats, such as terrorism.¹⁰⁷ This approach

101 NATO 1999.

102 Børgensen 2011, 64.

103 Mustasilta et al. 2023, 53–54.

104 Børgensen 2011, 67.

105 Børgensen 2011, 67–68.

106 NATO 2010.

107 Calmels 2020.

has persisted ever since and is also reflected in NATO's current military concept (DDA).

By the 2020s, NATO was politically mature enough to return to the collective defence game. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 reflected the fact that counterterrorism was no longer seen as an acute policy priority. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine provided the final push. The new Strategic Concept, adopted at Madrid in 2022, defined the fight against terrorism as being essential to NATO's security and restated the 360-degree approach to deterrence and defence. The alliance committed itself to having the necessary capabilities and resources for counterterrorism operations and to building partnerships with the international community. In many ways, then, the new Concept went further on terrorism than any of its predecessors. On balance, however, the 2022 Strategic Concept focused primarily on the threat posed by Russia and on rebuilding its collective deterrence. Instead of investing in large ISAF-style crisis management operations, NATO is now focused on training local militaries in their counter-terrorism efforts.

What does all this mean for Finland and the rest of Northern Europe? It is important to understand how NATO's internal debates regarding terrorism have developed. Although NATO has shifted its focus back to Europe and to its traditional deterrence tasks, the issue of terrorism will not go away. While counterterrorism is not currently seen as a core task on a par with deterrence (as it was in the early 2000s), it is still a crucial part of the alliance's 360-degree approach to security and defence. It will be important for Finland and other regional allies to show solidarity with member states concerned about the threat of terrorism to their populations, while ensuring that the alliance does not over-extend its strategic focus and priorities.

2.3.2 Russia

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO's Russia policy has come full circle, from deterrence to partnership and back to deterrence. In the late 1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev sought to replace the bipolar European security system centred on the Warsaw Pact and NATO with a new European security infrastructure based on cooperative security and an "all-European process" for Germany's unification.¹⁰⁸ The

United States firmly rejected these notions.¹⁰⁹ American troops would remain in Europe as long as the Europeans wanted them, Germany and former Eastern Bloc nations would eventually join the alliance and, importantly, NATO would be the primary Euro-Atlantic organization for security and defence, instead of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

In the first Strategic Concept since the end of the Cold War, NATO acknowledged that "profound political changes" had taken place in Europe. These developments left NATO without a clear threat to deter: "[T]he monolithic, massive and potentially immediate threat which was the principal concern of the Alliance in its first forty years has disappeared."¹¹⁰ The situation provided new opportunities for dialogue with the Soviet Union and with Eastern Bloc countries. NATO began to shift away from forward defence in its force posture. However, the Concept also acknowledged that even with these positive developments, Soviet military and nuclear capabilities were still the key factor that NATO had to consider in Europe.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, which was replaced in 1997 by the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. Russia also joined NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994. The alliance's relations with Russia were formalized in 1997 with the adoption of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, which established the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council (PJC) for sustained dialogue. Later, the 2002 Rome Declaration by NATO and Russia built on the principles and aims of the NATO-Russia Founding Act and announced a new stage in the relationship.¹¹¹ Overall, relations in the 1990s were positive and on an upward trajectory, apart from differences over NATO's air campaign in Kosovo, which led Russia to freeze its relations with NATO for a spell in 1999.

NATO's 1999 Strategic Concept was adopted at a time when there were few direct threats to allies' security on the horizon. Security issues had become globalized. Conventional threats to NATO were "highly unlikely" but might re-emerge in the future. Europe was still going through a period of "greater integration" and NATO saw itself as having a crucial role to play in the new European security order, alongside the

108 Zelikow & Rice 1997, 164.

109 Zelikow & Rice 1997, 133.

110 NATO 1991.

111 NATO 2002.

OSCE, the EU and the Western European Union (WEU). The benign security environment was seen as allowing NATO to maintain its force levels “at the lowest levels consistent with the requirements of collective defence and other Alliance missions”. Russia was still seen as a potential and essential partner with a “unique role in Euro-Atlantic security”. NATO-Russia relations would be developed “on the basis of common interest, reciprocity and transparency”. The aim would be to secure a peaceful and stable Europe “based on the principles of democracy and co-operative security”. Cooperation might even include joint crisis management operations, military exercises, or confidence-building measures.¹¹²

The 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States also initially drew NATO and Russia closer together. In 2002, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) replaced the old PJC, with the intention of providing a better structure for consultation, cooperation, joint action and joint decision-making. In the early years after the ousting of the Taliban, Russia provided military support to the new Afghan government. This lasted until 2006 when Russia suspended all aid in response to differences with the United States, for example over Ukraine’s Orange Revolution.¹¹³

NATO-Russia relations began to slowly spiral in 2008. At the Bucharest Summit in April, NATO countries agreed to welcome Georgia and Ukraine into the alliance, but hesitated to offer them membership action plans (MAP) – a process needed for admission. Four months later, in August 2008, Russia launched an attack against Georgia over the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions. This aggression notwithstanding, after Barack Obama assumed office in 2009, the United States sought to ‘reset’ relations with Russia. NATO was divided between those countries supporting the US-driven thaw in relations (France, Germany, and Italy) and allies with growing concerns about Russia’s aggressive behaviour, such as the Baltic states, the Czech Republic and Poland. The 2010 Strategic Concept took these disagreements into account by offering to cooperate with Russia on several questions, such as missile defence, narcotics, counterterrorism, the NATO-Russia Council as a forum for dialogue, and on Afghanistan, while also holding firm on NATO’s open door policy and offering security assurances to Eastern flank members.¹¹⁴

Overall, most NATO countries were not yet ready to abandon the possibility of a more cooperative relationship with Russia. Accordingly, the Euro-Atlantic area was seen as being “at peace” with a low level of threat against NATO territory. However, in a nod to the eastern flank allies, the Concept notes that a conventional threat “cannot be ignored”.¹¹⁵ Of the alliance’s three core tasks of collective defence, crisis management and cooperative security, defence was given the highest priority. Yet NATO did not consider “any country to be its adversary”¹¹⁶ and instead sought a “true strategic partnership” with Russia, which would enhance stability, peace, and security in the Euro-Atlantic area.¹¹⁷

The illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 was a wake-up call for many in the West. Russia’s actions “fundamentally challenged our vision of a Europe whole, free, and at peace”. The alliance still hoped for a “cooperative, constructive relationship with Russia”, but trust in the relationship had been broken by Russia, and since Russia was also violating international law and challenging the European security architecture, the “conditions for that relationship do not currently exist”. The alliance condemned Russia’s campaign in Ukraine and demanded the withdrawal of its forces from the occupied areas. NATO also suspended cooperation with Moscow and began to strengthen collective defence. However, the NATO-Russia Council remained in place and political communication channels were still open.¹¹⁸

NATO’s public statements in the years that followed showed both increasing resolve towards Russia, and the contradictory nature of its approach, which alternated between deterrence and dialogue. At the 2016 Warsaw Summit, allies were concerned about Russia’s willingness to attain political goals through force and saw its aggressive policies and actions as fundamentally challenging NATO. Russia’s actions had “reduced stability and security, increased unpredictability, and changed the security environment”.¹¹⁹ These actions included the annexation of Crimea, the destabilization of Eastern Ukraine, large-scale snap exercises, provocative military activities near allied borders, aggressive nuclear rhetoric, and repeated incursions into allied airspace.

115 NATO 2010, 10–14.

116 NATO 2010, 14.

117 NATO 2010, 29.

118 NATO 2014.

119 NATO 2016.

112 NATO 1999.

113 Janse 2021, 4.

114 Møller 2011, 55.

Regardless of these serious concerns, the allies agreed to continue “periodic, focused and meaningful dialogue with Russia” in order to avoid misunderstandings, miscalculations and unintended escalations. In short, NATO would seek both a credible deterrence and “meaningful dialogue and engagement with Russia”.¹²⁰ Between 2016 and 2018, the NATO–Russia Council met seven times to discuss the situation in Ukraine and to hold briefings on military exercises. The military lines of communication between NATO and Russia remained open and the alliance hoped to make “good use of these channels to promote predictability and transparency and reduce risks”. Yet challenges in the relationship continued to mount due to Russia’s actions.¹²¹ Finally, at the 2019 London Summit, the allies explicitly stated that “Russia’s aggressive actions constitute a threat to Euro–Atlantic security”. A constructive relationship with Russia would only be realized when “Russia’s actions make that possible”.¹²²

When Russia began its pre–invasion military build-up around Ukraine’s borders in spring 2021, NATO called on it to stop restricting freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, to de–escalate by withdrawing its forces, and to honour its commitments under the Minsk agreements.¹²³ After NATO expelled several Russian diplomats in October 2021 on suspicion of working for intelligence services, Russia suspended its mission to the alliance. In January 2022, high–level US and Russian delegations met under the auspices of the NATO–Russia Council to de–escalate Russian behaviour. Relations reached breaking point once Russia launched its full–scale invasion in February 2022.

At the Madrid Summit in June 2022, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia was defined as the most significant and direct threat to Euro–Atlantic security, and directly to NATO. The allies placed sole responsibility for the war on Russia, demanded that it end the war and declared their strong support for Ukraine’s “independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity”. The allies also upheld NATO’s open door policy and agreed to invite Finland and Sweden to become members. To allay concerns over possible Russian counter–reactions against these countries, the allies stated that “the security of Finland and Sweden is

of direct importance to the Alliance, including during the accession process”.¹²⁴

The new Strategic Concept, also adopted in Madrid, was equally explicit in its characterization of Russian aggression and the threat it posed to European security. By invading Ukraine, Russia had “shattered peace and gravely altered our security environment”. Its actions violated international law and inflicted suffering and destruction on the Ukrainian people. The war was not seen as an isolated incident, but as part of a larger and sustained “pattern of Russian aggressive actions against its neighbours and the wider transatlantic community”.¹²⁵ As a result, NATO’s security environment became more unstable and unpredictable, and the possibility of an attack on the alliance could not be ruled out.¹²⁶

In response, NATO highlighted its nature as an Article 5 collective defence alliance and its 360–degree approach to security. The Strategic Concept still defined three core tasks for the alliance (deterrence and defence; crisis prevention and management; and cooperative security), but prioritized rebuilding deterrence “as the backbone of our Article 5 commitment to defend each other”.¹²⁷ Strengthening collective defence would “deny any potential adversary any possible opportunities for aggression”. This would require, among other things, more in–place, multi–domain and combat–ready forces, better command and control, increased prepositioning of military materiel, investments in logistical and military infrastructure, and the adjustment of the ratio of in–place forces to reinforcements.¹²⁸ As a defensive alliance, NATO poses no threat to Russia, but it would respond to hostile actions. Any improvement in relations would depend on Russia changing its aggressive behaviour. In the meantime, the alliance’s goal would be to seek stability and predictability in its relations with Russia. To this end, NATO would maintain open channels of communication to “manage and mitigate risks, prevent escalation and increase transparency”.¹²⁹

At the following year’s Vilnius Summit, heads of state linked the war in Ukraine more closely to its global and international dimensions, such as nuclear safety, global food insecurity and negative impacts on

120 NATO 2016.

121 NATO 2018.

122 NATO 2019.

123 NATO 2021.

124 NATO 2022b.

125 NATO 2022c, 1.

126 NATO 2022c, 3.

127 NATO 2022c, 1.

128 NATO 2022c, 6.

129 NATO 2022c, 4.

the global economy. NATO also urged third countries not to support Russia, singling out Belarus and Iran for facilitating Russian aggression. The communiqué outlined a number of concrete Russian actions that NATO was monitoring. These included military build-ups in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Mediterranean regions, large-scale exercises with little or no notice beforehand, coercive nuclear signalling, the placement of nuclear-capable systems on Belarusian territory, and hostile hybrid actions against allies. Importantly for Finland, the alliance noted that in the High North, Russia had the capability to “disrupt Allied reinforcements and freedom of navigation across the North Atlantic”.¹³⁰ The Vilnius communiqué provides the most clear-cut rebuke and characterization of hostile Russian posturing towards the alliance since the end of the Cold War.

In summary, the alliance’s relationship with the Russian Federation began with a period of optimism in the 1990s, underwent rising tensions in the 2000s, and entered a slow negative spiral after 2008. Today, relations are practically frozen, with the exception of communications designed to uphold predictability and stability in the relationship. For the first time in decades, Russia is seen as a direct threat to the alliance. For Finland and its regional allies, this has multiple implications. First, for the moment, NATO’s strategic and threat perceptions are aligned with those of Finland, which, together with Sweden, applied for membership primarily to cover a security deficit caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and its nuclear intimidation. Second, strengthening NATO’s deterrence and collective defence is in the national interest of Finland and other frontline states. As the war in Ukraine continues, and especially once it comes to an end, sustained diplomatic efforts are likely to be needed to ensure that the allies do not lose focus on this front. Third, the global dimensions of Russia’s hostile actions are integral to the alliance’s 360-degree approach to security. Finland needs to take these factors into account to avoid being seen primarily as a regional ally. Finally, the hostile hybrid threat environment and Russia’s force posture in the High North provide Finland with opportunities to bring expertise and experience to the alliance’s internal discussions on Russia. Recent incidents in the Baltic Sea against Nord Stream 2 and the Balticconnector pipelines, as well as the situation on the Finnish-Russian border, where

Russia has directed hundreds of migrants towards Finland, will lend credibility to Finnish perspectives on these issues.

2.3.3 China

China is a relatively recent addition to the alliance’s agenda, but its prominence in key policy documents is steadily increasing. Since 2019, NATO’s policy towards China has shifted from seeing opportunities and challenges to seeing China as a competitor and a challenger to the alliance’s values and interests. NATO is divided on what role, if any, it should play towards China, and in the Indo-Pacific region, but allies have increasingly had to accommodate American interests and concerns about China’s rise.¹³¹ Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has shown that large-scale conflicts have global dimensions. Russia is also present in the Indo-Pacific region, but more to the point, China is observing how the West has reacted and continues to react to the war in Ukraine.

NATO’s China policies are driven by three developments: US-China superpower competition, China’s direct activities in the Euro-Atlantic area, and the concerns of NATO’s Indo-Pacific partners.¹³² The most important actor regarding China within the alliance is the United States, which sees itself as being engaged in a long-term competition with China, viewing it as the only competitor that has both the intent and the means to change the international order.¹³³ Allies have sought to find delicate compromises at the 2019 London Summit, 2021 Brussels Summit, 2022 Madrid Summit, and the 2023 Vilnius Summit. The main themes in key policy documents are China’s military build-up and force modernization, its expanding nuclear forces, lack of transparency, Chinese disinformation and hostile rhetoric, China-Russia relations, cyber and hybrid threats, strategic dependencies, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

At the 2019 London Summit, the allies agreed for the first time that China’s rising role in the international order presents “both opportunities and challenges” that need to be addressed, but they failed to elaborate on either.¹³⁴ Two years later, in Brussels, the allies laid

¹³¹ Simón 2023.

¹³² These are modified from Luis Simón’s (2023) three levels of analysis: China’s challenge to the international order, China’s direct challenge to Euro-Atlantic security, and China’s challenge to the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

¹³³ White House 2022.

¹³⁴ NATO 2019.

¹³⁰ NATO 2023.

out in more detail how NATO would approach a rising China. The allies were concerned about China's challenge to the rules-based international order, its expanding nuclear programme, lack of transparency over military modernization, military cooperation with Russia, and Chinese disinformation. NATO would maintain "a constructive dialogue with China where possible" and cooperate on common interests, such as climate change.¹³⁵

NATO-China relations were further strained after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, NATO called on China to refrain from supporting Russia, including by circumventing sanctions, and to cease supporting Russian disinformation related to the war and the alliance.¹³⁶ A few months later, at the Madrid Summit, leaders went further by stating that NATO faces systemic competition in which its interests, security and values are challenged by actors, including China.¹³⁷

China also made its debut in the new Strategic Concept adopted at Madrid. In the Concept, China is seen as a systemic challenger whose policies and ambitions pose a challenge to the alliance's interests, security and values. China and Russia are both seen as actors that seek to undercut the current international order. NATO is concerned about China's strategic intentions; transparency over its military build-up and expanding nuclear arsenal; aggressive rhetoric and disinformation; its attempts to control and create dependencies on key technologies, critical infrastructure, strategic materials and supply chains; and its strategic partnership with Russia. In response, the alliance wants to increase its shared awareness, resilience and preparedness, and seeks to "protect against the PRC's coercive tactics and efforts to divide the alliance". At the same time, NATO remains open to engaging China on issues of importance to the alliance's security.¹³⁸ At the Vilnius Summit the following year, allies restated the policies and language of the Strategic Concept and called on China not to provide any lethal materiel aid to Russia in its war against Ukraine.¹³⁹

NATO has grown closer to its Indo-Pacific partners as China has risen up the agenda. Chief among these are Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand due to their democratic status and closeness

to the United States. Since the 2022 Madrid Summit, the leaders, Foreign Ministers and Defence Ministers of these countries have been invited to participate in selected summits and ministerial meetings of the North Atlantic Council. In the new Strategic Concept, allies pledged closer cooperation with new and existing partners in the Indo-Pacific on common security interests and saw the security of the Euro-Atlantic area and developments in the Indo-Pacific as being inter-linked.¹⁴⁰ NATO and its partners in the region have been careful to avoid publicly linking cooperation to the challenges posed by China, focusing instead on broader international issues. However, both sides have an interest in deterring a great power in their respective regions. Dialogue with Indo-Pacific partners is also one way to observe how US planning in the region is developing and how this might affect the US presence in Europe.¹⁴¹

In conclusion, China will continue to feature as a contested and rising theme on the alliance's agenda. Finland and other allies, especially frontline states, face the classic alliance dilemma of choosing between abandonment costs or entrapment costs. Abandonment refers to the fear of being left behind or being marginalized in international cooperation, while entrapment refers to losing some sovereignty in order to stay part of that cooperation.¹⁴² In practice, allies will have to make case-by-case choices and compromises on the extent to which they will follow the American lead on China policies or seek to uphold their national interests and perspectives. In any case, Finland will need to strike a balance between US interests, the concerns of NATO's Indo-Pacific partners, responding to Chinese actions directly in the Euro-Atlantic area and, on the other hand, keeping NATO focused on rebuilding its deterrence towards Russia. This approach has intrinsic tensions, but also areas of complementarity. European countries and NATO's Indo-Pacific partners both have an interest in force production in the context of great power balancing, and can learn from each other in terms of operational planning and capability development.¹⁴³ Further, building credible deterrence in Europe allows the United States to focus more on its competition with China and on the Indo-Pacific region, which will sustain NATO's relevance in US strategy.

135 NATO 2021.

136 NATO 2022d.

137 NATO 2022b.

138 NATO 2022c.

139 NATO 2023.

140 NATO 2022c.

141 Simón 2023.

142 Pedersen 2023.

143 Simón 2023.

2.4 POSITIONING FINLAND AND NORTHERN EUROPE IN NATO

In recent years, NATO has rediscovered its traditional role as a collective defence alliance. The alliance is currently unified, re-energized, and larger than ever. Yet old differences over the strategic focus of the alliance are likely to resurface at some point, and US-China competition will pose new kinds of challenges to alliance cohesion. These developments cannot be overlooked as Finland seeks to position itself both within the alliance and in Northern Europe.

As a frontline state sharing a long border with Russia, Finland will be careful to maintain its reputation as a reliable and capable ally. Alliances rely on states' political commitments to support each other's security. These commitments are unenforceable, which leads states to evaluate the reliability of their allies and potential partners. This can be done, for example, by forming expectations about the future behaviour of a state based on the past reliability of that partner. This incentivizes states to consider the effect that their actions will have on their reputation in an alliance setting.¹⁴⁴ Finland will seek to demonstrate that it is committed to the security of all NATO allies and takes their security concerns seriously. Finland will also try to avoid being seen primarily as a regionally oriented ally interested only in its immediate neighbourhood. This can be achieved in part by actively engaging with the full range of NATO's agenda, including issues that would not otherwise be a top military or political priority for Finland.

Success in NATO will require skilled consensus-building. As a country on NATO's northeastern flank, Finland shares the same threat perception on Russia with Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. These countries have an interest in maintaining NATO's focus on deterrence against Russian aggression, and they each have a stake in the security of the Baltic Sea. They all seek to anchor the United States to the security of the region as well as to their own security. Avoiding competition over American engagement in the region will require close coordination and dialogue. Finland sees itself as a pragmatic security producer, more interested in action than tough talk. This can sometimes contrast with the more direct – and transparent – communication styles of the Baltic states and Poland, both towards Russia but

also within NATO. The Nordic and Baltic countries have a common interest in ensuring the efficient transfer of troops and materiel from the Norwegian Sea and the North Sea through Northern Europe towards Finland and the Baltic countries. This will include making sure that roads, railways, ports, and airports in the region have the capacity to receive and transfer allied forces and materiel as required.

Finland also shares with Sweden, Norway and Denmark a Nordic identity, common history and northern European geography. The Nordic countries have a common interest in the European Arctic, which also contains critical Russian military assets, such as the spearhead of Russia's strategic forces. It will be important to them that allies from outside the region have sufficient expertise and know-how to operate in winter and Arctic conditions. The Nordic countries differ in their specific geographical focus and capabilities. As a frontline nation with a conscript army, Finland is focused on land forces and its northeastern border with Russia. Sweden is rebuilding the capacity of its land forces, but also has significant sea and air capabilities and is focused on maritime security in the Baltic Sea. Norway is a traditional maritime power with a long-standing focus on the High North and Svalbard. Its interest in the Baltic Sea is limited compared to the other Nordic countries. In any case, the Nordic countries will be averse to being labelled a country group or a club within NATO, but common identity, interests, geography, and threat perceptions make it natural for them to compare notes and negotiation tactics before NATO meetings and to coordinate on policy processes on a case-by-case basis.

Finland is likely to strongly support NATO's 360-degree approach to security and defence, not only to show solidarity with southern allies, but also to focus attention on Russian activities in Northern Europe. Finland shares the southern allies' concerns about Russian activities in the Middle East and West Africa. As a military alliance, NATO's toolkit in countering asymmetric threats, for example in the Mediterranean Sea, is limited, but there is room for increased EU-NATO cooperation. As a long-standing EU member, it will be natural for Finland to advocate closer coordination and cooperation between the two organizations.¹⁴⁵ Finland also has fresh experience from its border of the types of hybrid threats faced by frontline states and can bring this expertise to bear in NATO's internal discussions.

144 Crescenzi et al. 2012, 252–253.

145 Iso-Markku 2024.

Terrorism will remain a major topic on NATO's agenda and in its strategic documents. Turkey has been the most active member state in driving the discussion in the alliance, but other member states share concerns over terrorism as well. For Finland and Sweden, it will be important to show solidarity with other allies and to recognize the threat that terrorism poses to the alliance, while also ensuring that countering it remains primarily a national responsibility. Finland and Turkey enjoy traditionally good relations, while Sweden and Turkey have enhanced their dialogue on terrorism. Problems in the relations remain, however, and Finland and Sweden will not soon forget the problems they faced in their NATO accession processes. Nevertheless, the Trilateral Memorandum signed by Finland, Sweden and Turkey can be used to continue the dialogue on asymmetric threats, which is crucial for Turkey, and on deterrence issues, critical for Finland and Sweden, facilitating smooth cooperation on these themes.¹⁴⁶ However, it is important to note that the Memorandum is not a NATO undertaking, but rather a trilateral vehicle for facilitating dialogue.

NATO will continue to grapple with how to deal with China. Finland will find it easy to support NATO policies aimed at reacting to China's activities directly in the Euro-Atlantic area, but will be wary of NATO losing its focus on collective defence in Europe. Anchoring the United States to the security of Northern Europe in the long term is a national priority. Building credible deterrence in Europe can also be promoted to create space for the United States to focus more on competition with China and on the Indo-Pacific region.

In summary, Finland will seek to portray itself as a pragmatic security producer for the whole alliance. Its focus will be on deterring the Russian threat in line with NATO's 360-degree approach. As such, the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and Poland will form the closest reference group to Finland in the alliance, but these countries will try to avoid being seen as a club or a regional grouping. Nevertheless, informal and formal coordination and cooperation will be close. At the same time, Finland will be keen to show solidarity and understanding for the security concerns of allies outside of Northern Europe, including on issues such as terrorism, China, and EU-NATO cooperation, but also on collective defence.

146 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2022.

3. FINLAND AND COLLECTIVE DEFENCE: THE FINNISH ROLE IN NORTHERN EUROPE AND BEYOND

Antti Pihlajamaa & Iro Särkkä

THIS CHAPTER COVERS the military aspects of Finland’s NATO membership. It focuses on the interaction between NATO’s evolving role in the Euro–Atlantic area and Finland’s integration into the alliance. The starting point is that NATO is in the midst of fundamental change, while integrating Finland (and Sweden) into its structures at the same time. The chapter addresses this dynamic through various themes, beginning with a brief overview of NATO’s current military strategic thinking and Finland’s potential role in it. It then outlines the ongoing changes in the Finnish defence mindset, both in terms of deterrence and defence. Finally, the chapter covers Finland’s first year as a NATO member and its future prospects through a number of concrete issues, such as NATO’s command structure and operational aspects.

3.1 NATO’S EVOLVING MILITARY STRATEGY SINCE 2014: A FINNISH VIEW

Military strategy is the link between political goals and operational execution. It translates political guidance into more concrete principles and requirements in order to lay the foundation for operational activities that are in line with political ambitions. That said, a solid military strategy is a vital tool, especially for a multinational alliance such as NATO.

For a long time after the end of the Cold War, NATO did not have a formalized military strategy – the last such document was adopted in 1968. The lack of a strategy was a natural consequence of NATO’s new focus on limited, high-intensity out-of-area operations. However, Russia’s first unprovoked war in Ukraine in 2014 led to the realization that the alliance should transform not only its policies and posture, but also its military strategic thinking.

3.1.1 Rediscovering the importance of military strategy

Policies and strategy, however, need to be backed up by credible capabilities – something that NATO also lacked. This had implications for its strategic thinking. NATO’s nascent post-2014 strategy was characterized by the idea that military credibility was built on the ability to respond rapidly with small, agile, and possibly pre-deployed multinational forces. The key element in NATO’s military threat perception was the risk of a smaller-scale surprise attack, not a protracted full-scale invasion. This assessment led to a focus on troop readiness and the introduction of a limited forward presence on the alliance’s eastern flank (see Chapter 1).¹⁴⁷ This approach obviously reflected the logic of NATO’s previous out-of-area operations, which involved the limited and precise use of military force to “manage” security threats. This “tripwire approach” emphasized the ability to provide rapid reinforcements. In other words, NATO built its strategy on the idea of “deterrence by reinforcement”.¹⁴⁸

A strategy that relies almost exclusively on reinforcements is fraught with significant challenges. Large-scale troop movements take a long time. Moreover, military mobility in Europe is limited for three reasons: “legal and procedural obstacles; constraints imposed by the limited capacity of infrastructure; and issues related to coordination, command and control”.¹⁴⁹ NATO’s most fundamental problem in the late 2010s was, however, the lack of deployable forces. More broadly, after years of deprioritizing territorial defence, a long-term total war requiring society-scale efforts remained distant for most Western states.

NATO’s recognition of the need for a more strategy-driven approach led to the adoption of a new

¹⁴⁷ As an example of the Western mindset, RAND’s famous 2016 wargame addressed the threat posed by Russia to the Baltic states. In this wargame, the concept of Russian operations was based on surprise and the rapid movement of attacking troops, rather than the protracted attritional warfare seen in Ukraine since 2022. RAND concluded that seven brigades and supporting elements “ready to fight at the onset of hostilities” might have prevented the Russian forces from reaching Tallinn and Riga in the short timeframe. It is perhaps fair to say that, by European standards, even seven brigades would have been a considerable mass and difficult to generate. See Shlapak and Johnson 2016.

¹⁴⁸ Hagström Frisell (ed.) et al. 2019, 49–50.

¹⁴⁹ Hodges et al. 2020, 2. See also Hagström Frisell (ed.) et al. 2019, 25–30.

formal military strategy in 2019, titled *Comprehensive Defense and Shared Response*¹⁵⁰ – NATO’s first proper defence strategy in 51 years. The classified document is reportedly based on two threats: Russia and terrorism, stemming from the alliance’s 360-degree approach.¹⁵¹ The strategy marked a significant step for the alliance in its journey back to preparing itself for conventional warfare.¹⁵² Importantly, the strategy process was driven first and foremost by military rather than political considerations, with NATO’s military authorities at the helm of the process.¹⁵³ The political level of the alliance has been slower to recognize the demands of modern warfare.

In addition to the military strategy, NATO also introduced two concepts with the aim of putting the new strategy into practice: the Overall Concept for Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) in 2020,¹⁵⁴ and the Warfighting Capstone Concept in 2021.¹⁵⁵ The DDA is “a strategic redesign of the Alliance’s approach to deterrence and defence”,¹⁵⁶ which addresses NATO’s security environment comprehensively in terms of geography, threats, time, and domains. The DDA directs the alliance’s activities both in peacetime as well as in crisis and conflict. It underlines the fact that the transition to conflict mode must begin in peacetime, not when a crisis is already underway,¹⁵⁷ implying that the DDA is fundamentally a war-prevention concept. Conceptually, the introduction of the DDA implicitly marked NATO’s first step towards a deterrence-by-denial model, away from the strategy based on limited presence and reinforcements.¹⁵⁸ In other words, the alliance aspired to be capable of denying an aggression outright through its forward deployed forces.

If the DDA’s focus is on urgent security matters, the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept (NWCC) looks beyond contemporary questions into the future. It outlines a path to NATO’s military advantage in the 2040s, emphasizing the need to find new ways of thinking regarding the military instruments of power in the context of the changing character of warfare. The

concept defines five warfare development imperatives: cognitive superiority, layered resilience, influence and power projection, cross-domain command, and integrated multi-domain defence.¹⁵⁹

Besides the introduction of several landmark documents, the 2022 Madrid Summit marked a significant milestone in NATO’s evolving military strategy. At the summit, the new emerging strategic approach was visibly reflected at the political level. Russia was defined as the most significant threat to the alliance, and the member states agreed on a new, more extensive and robust force model. The allies also agreed to reinforce the alliance’s battlegroups “where and when required”, supported by additional pre-positioned equipment on the territories of eastern flank allies.¹⁶⁰ The following year, NATO’s Vilnius Summit took bolstering deterrence and defence to a new level, as the alliance adopted new regional defence plans, which will tie the forces of NATO’s New Force Model to specific areas, thereby reaching a more concrete level of operational planning over time.¹⁶¹

These developments stemmed from a significant shift in allied military strategic thinking: the risk of a large-scale war was gradually returning to the Western threat landscape. However, the shift will not immediately result in a rapid change in NATO’s deterrence and defence practice, neither generally nor in the context of Northern Europe. The alliance’s strategy for defending its most vulnerable allies will still rest on reinforcements to a degree, although its frontline posture will be enhanced in the coming years. To a certain extent, this is understandable. Stationing and maintaining a large number of troops abroad is costly. Permanent deployments also undermine operational flexibility as troops are tied to a certain location. This might provide an adversary with an opportunity to strike at another, weaker point where NATO’s presence is smaller.

However, there are also several risks associated with this strategy. Firstly, if an adversary strikes, the alliance will have to react quickly to be able to defend its members. It is imperative that the North Atlantic Council reaches a political decision on deploying reinforcements very quickly. Ideally, the alliance should even be able to transfer troops under SACEUR’s command proactively and well before any aggression takes place. Pre-deployed forces – brigades or battlegroups

150 Aronsson et al. 2021, 52. On the development of the military strategy of 2019, see e.g., Dyndal & Hilde 2020.

151 Wolters 2019.

152 Rinsgmoose and Rynning 2021, 154.

153 Rinsgmoose and Rynning 2021, 155–157.

154 Covington 2023.

155 NATO Allied Command Transformation n.d.a.

156 Covington 2023.

157 Covington 2023.

158 Moller 2023, 95.

159 NATO Allied Command Transformation n.d.a.

160 See e.g., Pesu and Iso-Markku 2022, 14–15.

161 The issues in terms of operational planning are discussed elsewhere in more detail.

– can only hold a limited area and operate independently for a certain amount of time, more likely days rather than weeks. This means that reinforcements should be deployed immediately after the onset of hostilities in order to reach the theatre of operations in time. Secondly, the transfer of large numbers of troops is a demanding logistical operation: it would hardly be possible to bring all 100,000 troops – the most rapidly deployable capabilities of the New Force Model – to the theatre of operations at once.¹⁶² Thirdly, although the deployment of 100,000 troops may appear substantial, questions arise about the distribution of forces: How should the 100,000 troops be divided? Which country would receive additional troops on its territory, and how many? Fourthly, the question of time is also an operational matter: if the pre-deployed forces fail in their defensive mission, the reinforcements would then have to start their operations by defeating the adversary. The war in Ukraine has shown how difficult and costly it can be to retake once lost territories.

All in all, the hard part of NATO's military strategy is related to the alliance's expanded area of responsibility and the multi-faceted threat from Russia. As pointed out in Chapter 1, during the Cold War, NATO's military preparations were aimed at strengthening its capability to defend itself first and foremost on the Central Front, which covered the areas of present-day Germany. Other parts of the alliance were secondary to this mission. In the 2020s, it is much more difficult to see one or two theatres and their associated threat scenarios as a base for allied preparations. Today, there is no one front that would constitute the main focus of NATO's efforts. As a result, the political challenges within the alliance of striking a balance between competing threat perceptions and geographical priorities may be more difficult compared to the Cold War era (see Chapter 1). The question is further compounded by the increasing significance of various hybrid, space and cyber threats in the military threat landscape.

3.1.2 Finland and NATO's evolving military strategy

Finland plays a notable role in the defence of Northern Europe. Even as a NATO member, Finland – a frontline nation – will bear the main responsibility for the defence of its own territory based on Article 3 of the

Washington Treaty. Second, Finland's extremely demanding operating environment, including cold Arctic climate conditions, limits other allies' capacity to defend Finnish territory. Additionally, there are other less capable frontline states that would likely be in greater need of NATO reinforcements in the event of a larger regional conflict breaking out in Northern Europe. Given these realities, Finnish troops are also unlikely to deploy in considerable numbers beyond Northern Europe.

However, Finland would still expect allies to provide support in the unlikely event of military aggression. Finnish expectations would be directed at those allied nations that regularly operate in Northern Europe and have previously shown commitment to Finland's security, namely the United States, the United Kingdom and fellow Nordic states, particularly Sweden and Norway.

Finland's role in and contribution to NATO's military strategy and concrete deterrence and defence efforts can be summarized as follows.

First, Finland's expertise on Russia and the Russian armed forces can be useful to NATO. Finnish military intelligence has been closely monitoring Russia's military developments for decades and has a comprehensive understanding of Russian capabilities to share with allies.

Second, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, a relevant aspect of credible military power is the capacity for long-term and large-scale warfare. Finland's defence has always centred around the logic of total war. However, after the annexation of Crimea, the readiness of the Finnish Defence Forces was emphasized, partly at the expense of preparations for a protracted war in which military aggression could continue for years. This thinking is now changing as lessons are learned from the war in Ukraine, and both readiness and capability for long-term warfare are present in Finnish military thinking. That said, based on its own experiences, Finland can share its expertise in preparing for conventional, large-scale threats in the land, air, and maritime domains, as well as in comprehensive security and defence, with other allies where applicable.

Third, in NATO's northern direction, Finland constitutes a buffer zone for Sweden and especially Norway, allowing vital Norwegian ports to remain in allied hands. The ports are critical to securing the GIUK Gap, which in turn is relevant for reinforcements across the Atlantic – without which European NATO countries cannot survive in the long run. In other words, the northern parts of Finland can be seen as a territorial

¹⁶² See e.g., Hodges et al. 2020, 15–19.

extension of the North Atlantic maritime areas. Today, the defence of the North Atlantic starts from Northern Finland.

Fourth, for its part, Finland could also secure the use of the Baltic Sea if allies have to reinforce the defence of the Baltic states, for example by transferring supplies from Swedish territory – a critical rear area for the defence of Northern European frontline states.¹⁶³ In this regard, the Baltic Sea and its availability to the alliance are of particular importance.

Fifth, given the relative strength of its own forces, Finland would also enable the deployment of allied troops to other regions in a European-wide conflict. In other words, by maintaining a large wartime strength, Finland would free up NATO forces for deployment elsewhere in the alliance.

Lastly, NATO's New Force Model requires a large number of troops – 800,000 altogether. Thanks to its large reserve, Finland can potentially make a significant contribution to the NATO Force Model, especially if deployability is not a critical requirement and if Finnish troops could be pre-assigned to the defence of its own territory. However, Finland will be expected to improve the deployability of its land forces and to receive such capability targets from NATO's defence planning process.

3.2 THE FINNISH DEFENCE MINDSET IN TRANSITION: FROM NATIONAL TOWARDS COLLECTIVE DEFENCE

Finland is undergoing one of the most fundamental transformations in its defence policy as it integrates into NATO. Membership will entail a great deal of practical work over the coming years, but perhaps the biggest shift will take place in minds. However, the transition from national to collective defence has already begun.

3.2.1 Building the framework during the post-Cold War era

During the post-Cold War era, the Finnish defence mindset has diverged in many ways from the European mainstream. Unlike many other European nations, Finland retained an independent national defence model, with territorial defence as its core mission. The main focus of the Finnish armed forces has remained

on defending Finland, rather than fully embracing the tasks of crisis management and out-of-area operations. To support the traditional task of territorial defence, Finland has maintained general conscription, large stocks of legacy equipment, and a mobilization system.¹⁶⁴ However, some reforms were carried out. Traditional territorial defence was supplemented with new elements, such as securing vital functions of society and supporting the work of other security authorities.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, the structure and size of the Finnish Defence Forces were streamlined due to the increased emphasis on technology, coupled with rising costs. The wartime strength of the Finnish armed forces gradually decreased from 540,000 soldiers in the 1990s¹⁶⁶ to 230,000 soldiers, according to a Finnish Government Report in 2012.¹⁶⁷ The level was increased again to 280,000 in 2017. Finland has not avoided crisis management altogether, however. Overall, the end of the Cold War triggered the gradual internationalization of Finnish defence policy, in which demanding, non-UN crisis management was a significant feature.

Recent events in the international environment have forced Finland to rethink certain elements of its defence model. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the concept of territorial defence has acquired new layers. Firstly, the readiness of the Finnish Defence Forces has received more attention and resources. The events in Crimea triggered a discussion in Finland on the need to be better prepared for rapidly developing threat scenarios, not just for large-scale aggression. The possibility of a surprise attack had already been raised in government reports in the 1990s,¹⁶⁸ but the idea did not fully materialize in the defence posture. Whereas the air force and the navy had high-readiness capabilities, the Finnish army had mainly focused on training rather than being operationally prepared for high-readiness tasks. The annexation of Crimea reversed this trend,¹⁶⁹ and as a result, new readiness formations and units, as well as rapid reaction units, were established to improve the army's ability to quickly mobilize smaller forces.¹⁷⁰

Secondly, after 2014, internationalization became an even more significant part of the development of the

163 See e.g., Pesu 2023.

164 More broadly, see e.g., Pesu and Iso-Markku 2022, 9–10.

165 Raitasalo 2010, 85–88.

166 Finnish Government 1997, 62.

167 Finnish Prime Minister's Office 2012, 102.

168 See e.g., Finnish Government 1997, 56.

169 Raeste 2017.

170 Finnish Prime Minister's Office 2017, 34.

Finnish defence model, particularly towards the late 2010s. An extensive bi- and multilateral defence cooperation network was built within a few years after the annexation of Crimea. From the military perspective, defence cooperation had several functions. To begin with, it improved military interoperability between Finland and its partners, duly maintaining eligibility for potential NATO membership. Defence cooperation also decreased the threshold for military aid during crisis and war, and lastly, it implied the idea that even as a non-allied partner, Finnish security was worth committing to and the country was worth defending. However, despite this era of “alignment”, the traditional bottom line remained: ultimately, Finland was prepared to defend itself alone.¹⁷¹

3.2.2 Re-evaluating the Finnish deterrence concept

Interestingly, Finland has had an unconventional way of talking about and implementing deterrence. The Finnish word *pidäke* – anything that impedes a potential aggressor – has included the idea that a small state is not in a position *threaten* anyone, particularly a great power, with its military power.¹⁷² However, this understanding has also been underpinned by the assessment that a small state can raise the threshold against military aggression sufficiently high that the adversary, even a more powerful one, will not be able to achieve its aims and will thus be deterred from hostile measures. This approach has clear similarities with deterrence-by-denial thinking. However, the Finnish approach to deterrence has been characterized by subtlety: Finland has been careful not to explicitly name the adversary, and has avoided directly framing its own activities as a reaction to the adversary’s measures or posture. In addition, changes in the readiness of the Finnish Defence Forces have not been articulated in public.

It is worth asking what the transition from *pidäke* to deterrence means for Finland. At the practical level, one of the first small yet noticeable changes was the repeated use of Finnish airspace by allied intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) flights¹⁷³ – something that Finland did not allow as a partner nation.

Moreover, deterrence is also built by contributing to NATO exercises and planning activities, as well by having no self-imposed restrictions on membership. Finland has only recently accepted the idea that exercises with international involvement entail a deterrence signal,¹⁷⁴ although the defence forces certainly understood the value of exercises in demonstrating capability and resolve. Moreover, the element of punishment was not at the forefront of Finnish deterrence thinking – something that has now completely changed with entry into the nuclear alliance.¹⁷⁵ However, despite these changes, it is likely that the Finnish approach to deterrence will continue to adhere mainly to the principle of “doing more and talking less”, whereby deterrence measures are not always explicitly communicated.

With NATO membership, however, part of the earlier deterrence thinking has changed. Previously, an underlying idea of the Finnish deterrence policy was “strategic ambiguity”,¹⁷⁶ meaning that the threshold for military aggression may rise because of *the possibility* of international assistance, while the exact form and scope of potential help remained unclear. The ambiguity, although partly unintended, was also useful. Now, as an allied nation, the *starting point* for Finnish deterrence rests on the view that NATO will react if something happens. In that sense, the ambiguity has gone. However, Article 5 also leaves room for different forms of assistance. Finland must combine these two perspectives – the assurance of assistance and the ambiguity of its scope – to maximize the deterrence value of the alliance.

Furthermore, Finland will have to address additional and fundamental deterrence-related questions as part of the collective defence of NATO. Finland has always relied on the idea of exchanging space for time, slowing down the enemy and defeating it on advantageous terrain, on Finland’s side of the border. NATO’s new deterrence statement underlines that the alliance will defend *every inch* of its territory. Should Finland understand *every inch* literally or in a more flexible way, highlighting the need for an immediate response to the outbreak of hostilities?¹⁷⁷

Moreover, and interrelatedly, Finnish defence efforts have traditionally been characterized by an ethos of survival rather than an ethos of victory.¹⁷⁸

171 Pesu & Iso-Markku 2024.

172 See Hanska 2019.

173 Yleisradio 2023.

174 Solli 2024.

175 Pesu and Juntunen 2023.

176 See Lehtonen and Koivuola 2020, 150.

177 Jäämeri 2023.

178 Jäämeri 2023.

Finland's "theory of victory" has not necessarily anticipated a military triumph, destroying the enemy, but merely survival as a democratic nation. In other words, Finland has focused more on repelling the enemy than forcing the enemy out of the country. NATO membership may lead to a transformation in this thinking, particularly if the alliance successfully builds up its military strength and its deterrence and defence posture.

3.2.3 Striking a balance between Article 3 and Article 5: Finding the middle ground

As a NATO member, the most fundamental transformation in the Finnish defence mindset relates to the shift from the long tradition of national defence to the alliance's collective defence. Essentially, the question goes to the heart of Finnish defence thinking: What will be the balance between the Washington Treaty's Articles 3 and 5 in Finland – namely the balance between national and collective defence? In other words, where will Finland's defence now begin? What are Finland's expectations towards its allies? Is NATO, in the Finnish mindset, more like a separate, additional element of national defence efforts, or a fundamental starting point on which the entire defence system is based?

Finland's decision to join NATO without any pre-set restrictions already implied that the country was willing to broaden its traditional defence thinking. During the first months of 2024, Finland gradually started to articulate its positions regarding these issues. During his presidential campaign, Finland's new president, Alexander Stubb, proposed that Finland should create a high-readiness brigade of 5,000 soldiers. In his view, the formation would consist of a professional reserve and would be available both for NATO operations and national defence needs.¹⁷⁹

In February 2024, Finnish Minister of Defence Antti Häkkinen announced the first Finnish contribution to the alliance's peacetime collective defence tasks: Finnish F/A-18 fighters will participate in the air shielding mission in Romania, and a *Katanpää*-class mine countermeasure vessel will be part of the Standing NATO Mine Countermeasures Group 1.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, following the first announcement, Häkkinen proposed that Finland could host the alliance's subordinate land command and, additionally, command elements of

forward presence.¹⁸¹ Finally, Finnish Prime Minister Petteri Orpo stated that Finland is an area where land forces are particularly needed, and Finland even hopes that NATO will assign a strong force for the defence of the country. The country's leadership has underscored that Finland does not expect a permanent foreign military presence, but deems it vital that there are troops who train and have capabilities and plans to reinforce Finland.¹⁸²

These recent statements are politically significant signals of Finland's willingness to contribute to the collective defence of the alliance beyond its immediate security environment. They also demonstrate that Finland will bolster its own deterrence and defence posture through the alliance's capabilities. More precisely, in terms of balancing between Article 3 and Article 5, Finland seems to take a middle ground approach: On the one hand, it does not voice overtly optimistic expectations of an allied contribution to Finnish security or its commitments to collective defence. On the other hand, it does not strictly adhere to previous, pre-NATO membership practices and the markedly national defence perspective that this entailed.

All in all, as a member of NATO, Finland no longer addresses the question of defence through a purely national lens. However, despite NATO membership, one should also expect a good degree of continuity in Finnish defence thinking. Fundamental beliefs and ideas evolve slowly, and Finland's strategic culture has strongly emphasized self-help and self-reliance.¹⁸³ This implies that Finland, even as a NATO member, will not for instance give up any of its existing capabilities and will likely maintain full-spectrum armed forces. Moreover, the current generation of military leaders has been socialized into the national model. Generational change will inevitably affect the Finnish defence mindset, but the process will take years.

179 Nurmi 2023.

180 Ministry of Defence of Finland 2024a.

181 Ministry of Defence of Finland 2024b.

182 Yleisradio 2024.

183 See e.g., Seppo and Forsberg 2013.

3.3 BUILDING DEFENCE CAPABILITY: TOGETHER, BUT BASED ON WHICH PREMISES?

Integrating Finland's strategic planning and long-term capability development plans with NATO's defence planning process (NDPP) is a new endeavour for Helsinki. In terms of defence planning, Finland will be a unique ally, as it cannot be compared to any of its fellow allies. To illustrate this point: Some of Finland's closest NATO allies on the northeastern flank have a different kind of defence systems. Another new NATO country, Sweden, is rebuilding its territorial defence capabilities after the era of crisis management. On the other hand, Norway and Denmark have been building their defence systems within NATO for decades and have very different defence models compared to the conscription-based Finnish system. Furthermore, the Baltic countries also differ from Finland when it comes to their planning culture and the structure of their armed forces.

Considering Finland's uniqueness, the standpoints for the country's adaptation to the NDPP process should be favourable. Finland's strategic planning and long-term capability development have always been guided by a threat-based approach, which is increasingly the basis of NATO's planning as well. The Finnish focus has been on developing national defence. Even participation in crisis management operations was justified on the basis of the lessons learned for national defence. Against this backdrop, the Finnish capability planning mindset is in many ways compatible with the idea of wartime capability development that is emerging in NATO. This means that Finland does not have to abandon its culture of strategic planning, and that the obligations it takes on as a member of the alliance will be integrated into the national system in an appropriate manner.

Another relevant aspect of NATO's defence planning process are the capability targets that it sets for allies. Whereas the exact requirements of capability targets are classified, based on publicly available information, NATO's capability targets are understood to be quite generic. For instance, NATO has asked Denmark and the Netherlands to develop a heavy infantry brigade¹⁸⁴ – a target that Finland may also receive.¹⁸⁵

Finland already received interim capability targets from the alliance in 2023.¹⁸⁶ It is likely that as a new member state – and given the country's strategic culture – Finland will take its own targets rather seriously, although it is likely to be somewhat hesitant to build capabilities that are relevant in the context of NATO operations but not in the context of national defence. However, targets are “flexible enough to allow innovative solutions to be developed rather than replacing ‘like with like’”.¹⁸⁷ Moreover, by fulfilling its capability targets, Finland can demonstrate its commitment to the whole spectrum of NATO's collective security tasks.

The political guidance for the ongoing defence planning cycle was approved by allies in February 2023.¹⁸⁸ The capability targets of the present (and possibly the next) NDPP cycle might be even more significant for Finland than the interim ones, as they may address the lessons learned from the war in Ukraine more extensively. The targets are also guided by the new and ambitious regional plans adopted at the Vilnius Summit in 2023. In terms of future targets, it would be beneficial for the alliance to consider geographical realities in its planning process and acknowledge a more explicit division of labour in terms of deterrence and defence tasks.¹⁸⁹ Given Finland's position as a frontline state and its role in the defence of the northeastern flank, it would be logical to set targets for Finland in support of its given geopolitical realities.

For Finland, the potentially most difficult issue in the NDPP will be the question of deployability – in other words, how much Finland should invest in the deployability of its forces, particularly in the land domain. Participation in the new Allied Reaction Forces (ARF) – the high-readiness troops of the New Force Model – requires having deployable forces of some size. The ARF could be one way for Finland to contribute to collective defence, but there are uncertainties given its assumed roles as an immediate response tool and as SACEUR's strategic reserve.¹⁹⁰ ARF missions could include situations where the risks are considerable. Countries assigned to the ARF rotation are not in a position to easily withdraw from their commitments. The challenge for Finland in generating high-readiness capabilities relates primarily to the personnel: there are not enough regular military staff for such a capacity,

186 Ministry of Defence of Finland 2023.

187 NATO n.d.

188 NATO Allied Command Transformation n.d.b.

189 See Pesu 2023.

190 Cavoli 2024.

184 Pesu and Iso-Markku 2022, 21.

185 Simojoki 2023.

Allied Command Operations

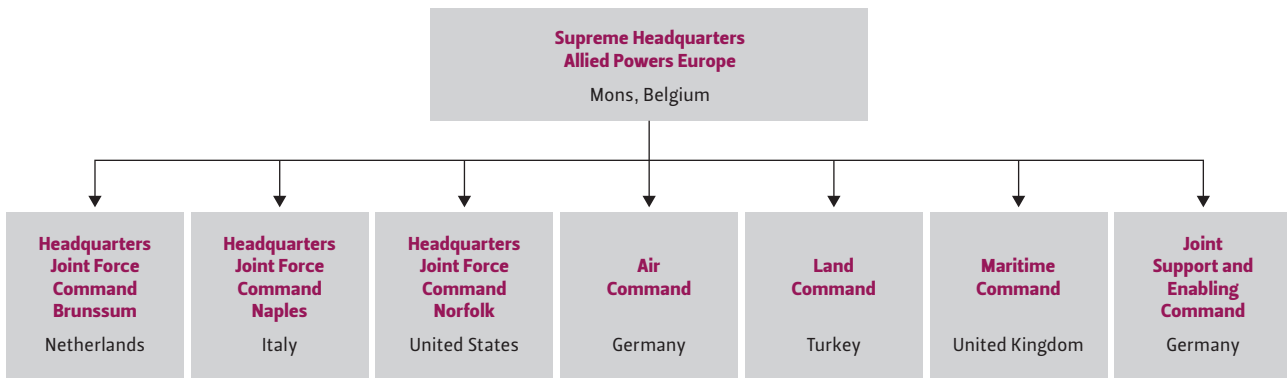


Figure 5. The NATO Command Structure: Allied Command Operations.
Source: NATO 2022. https://www.nato.int/nato_static_f2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2018_02/1802-Factsheet-NATO-Command-Structure_en.pdf

and conscripts could hardly be deployed abroad for such missions. The use of volunteer reservists would, however, be a potential avenue for contributing to deployability, as stated by Finnish leaders.¹⁹¹ Although deployability requires significant resources, building a robust, high-readiness force would simultaneously develop Finland's own capability to respond to rapid changes in the security environment.

Furthermore, building defence capabilities with a long-term perspective requires a common, coordinated understanding among the allies of the principles of warfare in the 2030s and 2040s. The main responsibility in this regard lies with Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk, Virginia. NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept and the NATO Warfare Development Agenda outline NATO's vision of future warfare. However, the ideas in these documents – such as multi-domain operations – require further elaboration in Finland. Finland is currently in the process of developing its approach and capabilities in the cyber and space domains, as well as its use of emerging technologies.

3.4 FINLAND IN NATO'S COMMAND STRUCTURES: EXPECTING SEAMLESS COORDINATION

NATO's current command structure – a legacy of the post-Cold War dismantling of territorial defence structures – took its current form in the 2010s to meet the requirements of the post-2014 security environment.¹⁹²

Interestingly, during Finland's NATO membership process, its position in NATO's command structure has generated considerable discussion, both domestically and in allied expert communities. The main question has been which Joint Force Command (JFC) Finland should be assigned to: JFC Brunssum or JFC Norfolk – the latter being the Finnish and Nordic preference, and apparently supported by NATO's political and military authorities. According to the Chief of the Royal Norwegian Air Force, a decision has been taken at political and military strategic levels that all Nordic countries will be assigned to JFC Norfolk, which implies that Finland could eventually be assigned there.¹⁹³ For the time being, and until JFC Norfolk is fully operational with sufficient staff, Finland will be assigned to JFC Brunssum.

In terms of the command structure solution, at least three issues stand out. Firstly, the existing JFC structure is not necessarily optimal for Finland. The assignment of the Baltic states to JFC Brunssum, and Norway, the UK and the US to JFC Norfolk divides Finland's neighbours and its most important allies into two separate commands. This division requires additional attention for effective mutual coordination. From the Finnish point of view, Northern Europe from the Baltic Sea area to the Arctic should be seen as a single strategic area – which doesn't mean that the whole area should necessarily be operationally assigned to the same Joint Force Command. Considering the current structure, a dividing line inevitably needs to be drawn somewhere near Finland. Avoiding such a split would require a comprehensive reform of the whole

¹⁹¹ Häkkänen 2023.

¹⁹² See e.g., Aronsson et al. 2020, 54–56.

¹⁹³ Folland 2023, 15.

command structure, which is not politically realistic at present. In any case, there will be operational boundaries within Northern Europe, necessitating close and continuous coordination between NATO's command entities. The key point is that any lines between JFCs should be defined by military, not political assessment. The command structure cannot directly determine the success or lack of coordination.

Arguments in favour of Finland's assignment to Norfolk seem to highlight the US connection – the headquarters is, after all, based in Virginia. Norway, Finland's close partner in the European Arctic, is already part of JFC Norfolk, and the Nordic countries have asked to be assigned under the same command for military operational reasons, but also on apparent political and cultural grounds. Currently, JFC Norfolk is seemingly understaffed, and it will take some years for it to reach full capability. Furthermore, Norfolk's strong focus on the maritime domain leads to questions concerning its compatibility with Finland, whose main concern is its long land border with Russia.¹⁹⁴ That said, building additional land domain capacity for Norfolk from scratch could be beneficial for Finland, as it would undoubtedly have a major influence on the direction of those efforts.

The command structure question also has certain political sensitivities within the alliance. The Baltic states, for example, are assigned to JFC Brunssum and have therefore been keen to see Finland as part of the Europe-based Joint Force Command.¹⁹⁵ The public debate on the issue has also suffered from conceptual inaccuracy. Commentators have often pointed out how Finland will be “under” a Joint Force Command. This is not the best way to characterize the relationship between Finland and the respective Joint Force Command. No Finnish troops are transferred to any authority unless a political decision is made. The deterrence and defence of Finnish territory will be planned in collaboration between the Finnish military authorities and NATO's command structure, instead of being dictated by the latter.

The evolution of NATO's command structure raises several questions pertinent to Finland. First, from a national perspective, it is easy to view the Joint Force Commands separately and weigh them against each other. However, given Finland's geopolitical position and its role both in the Baltic Sea (Brunssum's area of

responsibility) and in the Arctic area (Norfolk's area of responsibility), it may be inevitable that Finland will interact with both commands.

Secondly, and interrelatedly, regardless of the division of labour between JFCs, conducting joint operations in Northern Europe would necessitate various regional command and control arrangements below the JFC level. The idea of a forward joint level HQ, under the command of JFC Norfolk, has been put forward by Norway.¹⁹⁶ In addition, domain-specific component commands would potentially be needed, such as a Land Component Command (LCC), an army corps or a division HQ for land operations. If the LCC were to be located in Finland – as Finland has proposed¹⁹⁷ – the Finnish Army Command might be one option for the main body of the HQ, augmented with officers from the allies. Furthermore, the development of Nordic air cooperation calls for new command and control arrangements in the air domain. The Air Commander's Intent, published in March 2023, “directs the development of a Nordic Warfighting Concept for Joint Air Operations”,¹⁹⁸ where one line of effort includes integrated air command and control. Norway has already proposed that NATO should consider a new Nordic air operations centre.¹⁹⁹ Sweden, in turn, is reportedly ready to host a maritime command.²⁰⁰

Thirdly, the command and control question not only relates to JFCs, but also to other headquarters in NATO's command structure. Due to Finland's remote location in terms of reinforcements and supplies, the Joint Support and Enabling Command (JSEC) is also an important player to be considered. Its role during crisis and conflict is to “coordinate reinforcement by forces, and the subsequent sustainment”.²⁰¹ Domain-specific commands, particularly Maritime Command (MARCOM), could also play a role within the NATO Command Structure in the Baltic Sea context.

Both MARCOM and Air Command (AIRCOM) are located under the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) in parallel with JFCs. Thus, MARCOM and AIRCOM should be capable of executing operations within their own domain, and even provide command and control for small joint naval and air operations across the alliance's area of responsibility. Besides

194 Stenroos 2023a.

195 Kunnas 2024.

196 Stenroos 2023b.

197 Ministry of Defence of Finland 2024b.

198 Nordic Air Commander's Intent n.d.

199 Insinna 2022.

200 Kervinen 2024.

201 NATO Joint Support and Enabling Command n.d.

these roles, they could act as a component command under the JFC,²⁰² even though this option seems to be untenable in a major war. Nevertheless, these capabilities open up options for command and control arrangements within the Baltic Sea area: MARCOM might oversee the maritime operations in coordination with, not necessarily under, the JFC. Naturally, this would have implications for the Finnish navy. It has also been proposed that Germany's maritime component command could have a role in the maritime domain of the Baltic Sea.²⁰³

All in all, Finland is likely to cooperate with several NATO commands. Militarily, this should not be insurmountable, as cooperation and coordination with various actors is at the core of military action. However, NATO should ensure that as the strategic headquarters, SHAPE (and ultimately the SACEUR) looks at the big picture instead of leaving coordination solely in the hands of subordinate commands, and countries that are stakeholders in the Baltic Sea region. As a matter of fact, SHAPE is reportedly transforming itself into a warfighting command, which is a step in the right direction.²⁰⁴

3.5 IN THE EVENT OF A RAINY DAY: NATO'S EVOLVING OPERATIONAL PLANNING AND FINLAND

After the end of the Cold War, NATO's preparedness for crises and conflicts gradually became more capability-oriented and less threat-based.²⁰⁵ As NATO focused on out-of-area operations, comprehensive defence plans for Europe were no longer developed. As pointed out earlier, the war in Georgia in 2008, and especially the annexation of Crimea in 2014, led NATO to take steps to develop new defence plans, initially in the form of the limited Graduated Response Plans, which focused on specific vulnerable areas, such as the Baltic states and Northern Norway. They were immediately executable only with respect to their first parts, which involved the use of NATO Very High Readiness Joint Task Forces (VJTF). Parts 2 and 3 of the GRPs would have required both additional planning and force generation, resulting in a considerable delay in their potential implementation.²⁰⁶

The approval of the Deterrence and Defence of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) concept in 2020 promised to change NATO's insufficient focus on planning. In 2022, NATO Military Committee Chairman Rob Bauer referred to the DDA as a "family of plans", suggesting that the concept was being refined into more concrete plans to defend the alliance.²⁰⁷ Reportedly, "(t)he DDA family of collective defense plans include a strategic plan for the defence of the entire AOR;²⁰⁸ regional plans for the defence of regions within the AOR; strategic plans for individual military domains (air, land, maritime, special operations forces, cyber, and space); and prudent planning for a wide range of contingencies".²⁰⁹

SACEUR's AOR-wide strategic plan ("SASP") is designed to "address multiple contingencies in crisis and conflict",²¹⁰ providing the framework for strategic plans for individual military domains, also known as functional plans. Eventually, at the Vilnius Summit in July 2023, the alliance adopted three regional defence plans.²¹¹ The northern plan, under the responsibility of Joint Force Command Norfolk, deals with the Atlantic and European Arctic. Joint Force Command Brunssum's central plan stretches from the Baltics to the Alps, and Joint Force Command Naples' southern plan focuses on the Mediterranean and Black Seas.²¹²

Due to their wide geographical coverage, regional defence plans cannot be very precise. They are more likely to be broad descriptions and principles of how to defend a specific territory, rather than exact plans laying out the details of such an effort. As regional plans are hierarchical sub-products of the above-mentioned strategic plans, it can be assumed that they are operational in nature. In this case, future tactical-level plans would outline the operations in more concrete terms. The determination of the troops and capabilities needed is thus a matter of the next step.²¹³

Even if the most likely threats can be assessed relatively well in advance at the tactical level, it is also generally acknowledged that plans tend to become obsolete once the first shots are fired. Therefore, plans should ultimately be viewed in the manner of Dwight D. Eisenhower: "Plans are nothing; planning is everything." It is unlikely that the plans will be

202 Aronsson et al. 2020, 55.

203 Friis and Tamnes 2024, 8.

204 Detsch 2024.

205 Pesu and Iso-Markku 2022, 27.

206 Aronsson et al. 2020, 53.

207 Bauer 2022.

208 Area of Responsibility.

209 Covington 2023.

210 Wolters 2021.

211 NATO 2023.

212 Joshi 2023.

213 Bauer 2023.

implemented exactly as they stand, but the work done on them will in any case serve the execution of the operation.

From Finland's point of view, the approval of regional defence plans has a vital geostrategic dimension, and it is important that the plans have been adopted in the first place. The development of the new plans shows that the alliance takes operational planning seriously and that the significance of Northern Europe is taken into consideration. After all, the region is reportedly covered by both northern and central plans – both being regions of immediate concern for Finland.

Furthermore, Finland seems to be positioned at the nexus of the plans, given its geographical location at the intersection of the Baltic Sea region and the European Arctic. On the one hand, the Brunssum-led central plan could be extended to cover Finland's territory. On the other hand, Finland is intrinsically linked to the Arctic and North Atlantic security dynamics, which are covered by the Norfolk-led northern plan. Under these circumstances – akin to the command structure question – Finland is interested in and influenced by both northern and central directions. From the Arctic perspective, Finland, Sweden, and Norway share a common operational space. Finland and Sweden's prior cooperation in operational planning provides a solid basis for deepening cooperation within NATO. From the Baltic Sea perspective, Finland must consider having some kind of contingency plan in support of Estonia, particularly in the unlikely scenario where the execution of NATO's operational planning would fail. In any case, Finland and Estonia have a clear common interest in countering a potential adversary in the region of the Gulf of Finland.

Lastly, Finland has conducted operational planning for a long time in this region, bringing substantial expertise to the alliance in this regard. As a result, in order to integrate the alliance's efforts into Finland's own plans in a coherent way, planners in both Brunssum and Norfolk will have to familiarize themselves with the Finnish operational environment from south to north, as well as the capabilities required to operate within them.

3.6 FINLAND'S ROLE IN COLLECTIVE OPERATIONS

Finland's role in potential collective defence operations based on NATO's Article 5 would depend primarily

on whether the operation would be carried out inside or outside Finnish territory. From a purely military standpoint, the most relevant question is how many capabilities a frontline country such as Finland should transfer laterally to a theatre of operations elsewhere. Once the capabilities are deployed outside Finland, these troops and equipment might not be regained, but should be replaced.

This section of the chapter discusses Finland's potential role in two different Article 5 operations: those on Finnish territory and those elsewhere.

3.6.1 Article 5 operations on Finnish territory

The alliance's role in operations on Finnish territory would probably include several elements, such as sharing situational awareness and intelligence assessments, supporting targeting and long-range fires, providing space and cyber capabilities and material support, as well as securing its delivery through the sea lines of communication in the Baltic Sea. Moreover, allied air forces could also quickly reinforce Finland's defence. Some allies already have experience of Finnish road-runway operations, which utilize an extensive network of road bases.²¹⁴

The most difficult part of the allies' support would relate to the land domain. As previously mentioned, there are a limited number of allies that can be expected to operate in Finland's winter conditions. Furthermore, it takes time to create such a capability, and only a few countries are likely to be interested in doing so. Additionally, Finland has its own tactical principles concerning land warfare, which have been developed over several decades. Under these circumstances, it may not be meaningful to extend interoperability targets between different nationalities at too low a level – in other words, below the brigade level. This would suggest that foreign forces operating in Finland should be large enough to have an independent operational capacity.

However, it seems clear that Finland sees the land forces of its allies as having some kind of role in the defence of Finland. Finland's desire to host a Land Component Command or an equivalent arrangement implies that Finland does not see itself as operating completely alone in the land domain. However, it is likely that most of the land forces operating in Finland

²¹⁴ Osborne 2023.

would still be from the Finnish Defence Forces. Finland would retain primary responsibility for defending Finland, and NATO forces would have a supportive role. Interestingly, in March 2024, Finland participated in its first collective defence exercise as a NATO member. Nordic Response 24 took place in the territory of Finland, Sweden and Norway as part of Steadfast Defender 24.²¹⁵ The Finnish and Swedish armies formed a division in the exercise with a detachment from the UK, with the commander from Finland and the deputy from Sweden,²¹⁶ underlining the countries' common interest in defending the European Arctic.

Depending on the command and control structures in place, the question of a possible transfer of authority could arise, which is a new issue for Finland in the context of national defence. In other words, Finland has to consider the idea that the alliance, not Finland, could lead an operation in the country. There are many possible scenarios, but the common thread is that during a crisis, the authority over some Finnish troops could be transferred to NATO command. For example, at least some parts of the Finnish army might be assigned to the command of an LCC possibly located in Finland. It is conceivable that the commander of the LCC would be a Finnish general, albeit under the direction of a higher NATO commander, rather than the Finnish Chief of Defence. At the same time, some troops might remain under Finnish command.

3.6.2 Article 5 operations outside Finnish territory

In the event of aggression in Finland's immediate vicinity, for example in the Baltic countries, Finland – and the whole NATO alliance – would have a major interest in preventing an escalation against Finland. In such a scenario, Finland's main concern would be to secure its own territory. It is therefore difficult to discern sound military logic for the extensive use of Finnish land forces elsewhere, except perhaps in the role of a small rapid reaction force, namely the ARF. This does not mean, however, that Finland would have no role in Article 5 operations beyond Finnish territory. In the air domain, the Finnish Air Force might support the Baltic countries even from Finnish airspace. In the maritime domain, on the other hand, securing the sea lines of communication

in the Baltic Sea would be vital for all regional allies. The Finnish Navy would monitor all situations and assist NATO's situational awareness. It is also worth noting that various allied weapon systems will be able to engage targets from coast to coast in the Baltic Sea area.

If Finland eventually joins JFC Norfolk together with Sweden and Norway, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which Finnish troops would be deployed elsewhere in the same joint operational area, where Finland is a frontline state. Finland's assignment to Norfolk would also mean that Finland and the Baltic states would be in different Joint Force Commands. Although the cross-deployment of forces between operational commands and firing into the neighbouring joint operational area would not be impossible, it would require additional coordination.

If the Article 5 operation were to take place further away, for example in the Black Sea region, while the situation on the northeastern flank was stable, the pressure on Finland to deploy forces might be somewhat greater. This could be the case particularly if Finland were part of the ongoing rotation of the Allied Response Force. The added value of the Finnish unit would not necessarily be decisive: effective military performance would require knowledge of the local terrain and operational environment, which in turn would require training in similar areas. Planning a mission in advance would also be preferable. In the case of the ARF, these kinds of preparations would not necessarily be possible.

All in all, the best output of Finland's capabilities for NATO's collective defence and deterrence leans on the Finnish concept of territorial defence. From the Finnish perspective, it is important to note that troops deployed elsewhere would not be available for operations in Finland. The domestic legitimacy of Finland's participation in life-threatening missions is a separate question that needs to be answered. This may require clear public articulation of the meaning of NATO's logic of "one for all and all for one". However, political expediency, and in some cases Finland's own interests, may require preparing for foreign deployments. This aspect should not be underestimated in an alliance that also operates at a political level. Hence, striking the right balance between national defence and NATO's collective security requirements will be the main challenge for Finland in the coming years.

215 Finnish Defence Forces n.d.

216 Finnish Defence Forces 2024.

CONCLUSIONS

Matti Pesu

THIS FINNISH FOREIGN Policy Paper has delved into NATO's evolving role in Northern Europe. A key observation of the study is that the strategic importance of the region has grown, both in the long and short term. During the Cold War, NATO's northern direction had considerable and growing importance but was clearly a subordinate flank to the central front located in Germany.

After the end of the Cold War, the geostrategic significance of Northern Europe to Euro-Atlantic security waned as the threat of conventional war receded. However, this era was also marked by another development – namely NATO enlargement. The respective memberships of Poland and the Baltic states expanded the alliance's area of responsibility in Northern Europe, although NATO did not expend much time and effort in contemplating how these new allies would be defended.

This changed in 2014 when Russia first invaded Ukraine, triggering NATO's adaptation to the more tumultuous security environment. The alliance took its first significant steps in establishing a regional defence posture in the Baltic Sea region by enhancing readiness, introducing a limited military presence and associated command and control elements, as well as rolling out executable but narrow operational plans. Regarding the European Arctic, NATO tweaked its command structure by establishing JFC Norfolk and intensifying its exercise activities, for example. These activities were underpinned by an assessment that the alliance does not necessarily have to be able to deny a military aggression right away, but rely on reinforcements to repel the aggression from its area of responsibility.

This *deterrence-by-reinforcement* thinking was soon complemented and even challenged by different ideas introduced by NATO's new military strategy and its implementation documents. They set off a process whereby NATO sought to enhance its capability to deny aggression and defend “every inch” of the alliance. This trend was accelerated by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The first elements of NATO's new posture took shape at its Madrid Summit

in June 2022, where it introduced its new expanded and robust force model and declared that it would enhance its frontline battlegroups to a brigade level when and where required, supported by pre-positioned equipment. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, NATO again agreed on three new regional plans, two of which cover parts of Northern Europe.

The Russian invasion also triggered Finland's and Sweden's NATO bids, which led to formal memberships in April 2023 and March 2024, respectively. The accession of the two countries to the alliance fundamentally shapes the Northern European security architecture. It not only enables the alliance to better defend its regional allies, but it has also generated demands for NATO to adapt to new realities in which it must defend two new allies. As part of the adaptation process, the alliance needs to consider how to involve the Northern European theatre in its regional plans, and how to build sufficient regional command-and-control arrangements, for example.

The bottom line concerning the long-term development is, however, that Northern Europe can no longer be perceived as a side flank of NATO, but rather as one of the focal points of Euro-Atlantic security. Northern Europe will be a key driver of, and arena for, NATO's deterrence and defence efforts. Keeping the region safe and stable is a critical prerequisite for ensuring the security of the whole Euro-Atlantic region.

Nevertheless, Finland and its Northern European allies must convince their allies that strong regional efforts are needed to maintain security in Northern Europe. This requires skilful navigation of NATO's decision-making system, which is marked by different threat perceptions, regional priorities, and other strategic divergences. Currently, the alliance is fairly united on the need to respond to the threat posed by Russia. However, many allies still do not see Russia as a security threat in the sense of a potential invader. They may consider Russia's actions in Europe and elsewhere destabilizing, but their main threat perceptions emphasize broader security concerns emanating from the south, such as terrorism, migration and energy security. The intensity of the threat perception concerning Russia is by and large determined by

geographical proximity. If the perceived threat from Russia diminishes in the future, these differences in views on Russia may widen further. The allies are also currently divided over the issue of China as an emerging threat.

Against this backdrop, the alliance's 360-degree approach to security threats will remain a critical and pertinent concept in reconciling these views. Finland and other Northern European allies – who undoubtedly see Russia as their main security threat and call for robust deterrence and defence measures – need to focus on adept consensus-building in order to achieve their goals. The Nordic countries, Baltic states and Poland will form the closest reference group to Finland in the alliance, and informal and formal coordination and cooperation will be close among these allies. At the same time, Finland should be keen to show solidarity and understanding for the security concerns of allies outside of Northern Europe, including on topics such as terrorism, China, and EU-NATO cooperation.

From the Finnish point of view, the evolution of NATO's military posture towards the deterrence-by-denial model is beneficial, as the alliance's strategy of heavy reliance on reinforcements is fraught with risks. However, the biggest challenge to NATO's evolving military strategy is the expanded area of responsibility – namely the long front line stretching from the European Arctic to the Black Sea area. Today, there is no front that would constitute the main focus of NATO's efforts. This will introduce a fiercer element of competition into NATO decision-making, as allies seek to draw the alliance's resources and attention to their threat scenarios and geographical priorities.

Finland's contribution to NATO's military strategy and posture can be encapsulated in six ways. First, Finland can offer NATO its expertise regarding the Russian armed forces. Second, Finland has unceasingly focused its planning efforts on large-scale conventional warfare, and can share its expertise in preparing for such a conflict in the land, air, and maritime domains. Third, Finland constitutes a buffer zone between Russia and the strategically critical Norwegian coasts, being essentially a territorial extension of the North Atlantic maritime area. Fourth, Finland can also secure the use of the Baltic Sea if allies have to strengthen the defence of the Baltic states. Fifth, given the relative strength of its own armed forces, Finland also enables the deployment of allied troops to other regions in a European-wide conflict. Lastly, Finland can potentially significantly contribute to the NATO Force Model,

especially if the deployability of land forces is not a critical requirement.

In the long run, NATO membership forces Finland to rethink some aspects of its defence mindset, ranging from its understanding of deterrence to its theory of victory in a conventional war. Furthermore, it has to strike the right balance between national defence (Article 3) and collective defence (Article 5). Finland will likely seek a middle ground, where it adheres to its traditional culture of self-reliance but does not assess defence issues through a national lens only. In terms of NATO's defence planning and the NDPP, the trickiest question will be the issue of deployability – in other words, how much Finland should invest in the deployability of its forces, particularly its land forces. The main challenge for Finland in offering high-readiness capabilities would concern personnel: there are not enough regular staff for such a capacity, and conscripts could hardly be used for short-notice missions.

When it comes to NATO's evolving command and control structures, irrespective of the eventual arrangements, Finland will likely be located close to the interface between the respective areas of responsibility of JFC Brunssum and JFC Norfolk, requiring close coordination between the two commands. Furthermore, in the Finnish view, Northern Europe should be treated as a single operational entity – in other words as an area where NATO must be able to conduct joint operations. This capability would necessitate various regional command and control arrangements below the JFC level. Some of these, a land command component, for example, could be located in Finland.

From Finland's point of view, the approval of regional defence plans at NATO's 2023 Vilnius Summit has vital geostrategic dimensions, and it is important that the plans were adopted in the first place. As with the command structure issue, Finland seems to be positioned at the nexus of the plans, given its geographical location at the intersection of the Baltic Sea region and the European Arctic. Finland is thus interested in and influenced by both northern and central directions. Moreover, both NATO's frontline and Arctic planners in Brunssum and in Norfolk will have to familiarize themselves with the Finnish operational environment from south to north, as well as the capabilities required to operate within them.

Lastly, Finland's role in potential collective defence operations based on NATO's Article 5 would depend primarily on whether the operations were carried out inside or outside of Finnish territory. The alliance's

role in operations on Finnish territory would probably include several elements, such as sharing situational awareness and intelligence assessments, supporting targeting, as well as providing material support and securing its delivery through the sea lines of communication in the Baltic Sea. Moreover, allied air forces could also quickly reinforce Finland's defence. In addition, Finland has to consider the idea that the alliance, not Finland, could lead operations in the country. There are many alternatives in this respect, but the main point is that during a crisis, there could be a transfer of authority from Finnish to NATO command.

In the event of aggression in Finland's immediate vicinity, for example in the Baltic countries, both Finland and the whole NATO alliance would have a major interest in preventing an escalation against Finland. It is therefore difficult to discern sound military logic for the extensive use of Finnish land forces elsewhere in Northern Europe, except possibly in the role of a small rapid reaction force, namely the ARF. This is not to say that Finland would have no role to play in Article 5 operations beyond Finnish territory. For example, with respect to the Baltic states, it could play a meaningful role in the air and naval domain. Furthermore, if Finland eventually joins JFC Norfolk together with Sweden and Norway, it is difficult to imagine a situation where Finnish troops would be deployed to locations outside of the joint operational area under this command.

If the Article 5 operation were carried out further away, for example in the Black Sea region, and the situation on the northeastern flank were stable, the pressure on Finland to deploy forces might be somewhat greater. This could be the case particularly if Finland were part of the ongoing rotation of the Allied Response Force. However, Finland's own interests may require it to prepare for a deployment further afield. This aspect should not be underestimated in an alliance that also operates at a political level. Striking the right balance between domestic needs and the needs of the alliance will be a challenge for Finland given its distinctly national perspective on defence./

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