

BRIEFING
PAPER

439

June 2026



NATO's Forward Land Forces in Finland

Defending the northeastern frontline

Iro Särkkä, Jakob Gustafsson,
Joel Linnainmäki & Anna Savolainen

FIIA

FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

BRIEFING PAPER 439 June 2026

NATO's Forward Land Forces in Finland

Defending the northeastern frontline

Summary

- After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO transformed its forward presence in frontline states from enhanced Forward Presence to Forward Land Forces (FLF), complementing forward-deployed battalion-sized units with the ability to scale up to brigade-sized units where and when required. The FLFs currently consist of eight multinational battlegroups and brigade-sized reinforcements in frontline states. In 2024, the Allies decided to develop an FLF presence in Finland.
- FLF Finland follows NATO's general concept for Forward Land Forces, but it differs from existing models. The battlegroup, led by framework nation Sweden, will be based in Northern Sweden, not Finland. Allied forces will rotate on Finnish territory based on exercises and the evolving security situation.
- FLF Finland offers an opportunity to deepen Finnish-Swedish defence cooperation and NATO integration and reinforce the Alliance's posture on the northeastern frontline, while meeting NATO requirements.
- Russia has pledged to strengthen its military presence near Finland once the war in Ukraine ends. This could prompt Allies to assess whether FLF Finland should be expanded to include in-place forces on Finnish territory, rather than relying on rapid mobilization and reinforcement from Sweden and contributing countries.

Authors

Iro Särkkä

Senior Research Fellow
Finland and Northern European Security
Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Joel Linnainmäki

Research Fellow
Finland and Northern European Security
Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Jakob Gustafsson

Analyst
Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI)

Anna Savolainen

Researcher
Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI)

Introduction

Finland's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2023 extended the Alliance's northeastern frontline by 1,340 kilometres, from the shores of the Baltic Sea to the Norwegian–Russian border on the Kola Peninsula. A year after Finland's accession, the Alliance decided to develop NATO's Forward Land Forces (FLF) in Lapland, northern Finland. FLFs are multinational battlegroups that should be scalable to brigades at short notice and are deployed in the eastern part of the Alliance. They are hosted by a frontline state and led by a framework nation, with other Allies contributing forces. The decision quickly prompted questions about which country would serve as the framework nation for FLF Finland, what the force's composition would be, and who would participate in it.

From the start, the model developed by Finland and Sweden has differed from the FLFs in other frontline states. Rather than placing permanent or rotationally deployed troops in the host nation, FLF Finland was designed as a more flexible structure, with Sweden acting as the framework nation. Established and placed under NATO command in summer 2026, with recruitment still ongoing, FLF Finland will gradually move towards full operational capability by 2030. It will be built around a Swedish battlegroup based in Boden, northern Sweden, and a multinational staff element permanently placed in Rovaniemi, Finland. The United Kingdom, Italy,

France, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland intend to contribute to the force.¹

The backbone of FLF Finland was formed around strong Finnish–Swedish bilateral ties, deepened especially through the Finnish–Swedish defence cooperation (FISE) format since 2014, as well as through the trilateral Finnish–Swedish–Norwegian and minilateral Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) formats. At the same time, FLF Finland must be able to function as part of a fully multinational group and meet NATO's requirements for deterrence and defence.

This Briefing Paper describes and analyses the significance of FLF Finland for NATO's deterrence and defence on the northeastern frontline as part of NATO's forward defence, which aims to defend against any aggression as close as possible to the Alliance's border with Russia. The paper examines the rationale behind the FLF's structure, composition, and modus operandi, accounting for both political

1 Ministry of Defence of Finland (2026) "NATO Forward Land Forces Finland to start operations on 6 June". https://valtioneuvosto.fi/-/236553176/naton-eteentyonnetyt-maajoukot-suomessa-aloittavat-toimintansa-6.-kesakuuta?languageld=en;_us; Ministry of Defence of Sweden (2026) "Swedish troops to be placed under NATO command in FLF Finland". <https://www.government.se/press-releases/2026/06/swedish-troops-to-be-placed-under-nato-command-in-fff-finland>; Sundgren, Linda (2026) "Hundratalssoldater behöver rekryteras till FLF Finland", Officerstidningen, 4 June. <https://officerstidningen.se/hundratalssoldater-behoover-rekryteras-till-fff-finland/>.

and military considerations, while also highlighting the significance of the bilateral FISE defence cooperation format as the cornerstone of the FLF. Finally, it compares the Finnish–Swedish FLF approach with NATO’s FLFs in the Baltics. The paper concludes that the flexible model of FLF Finland is well suited to Sweden’s and Finland’s preferences and the requirements of deterrence and defence on NATO’s northeastern flank. However, to remain relevant and attuned to the threat, it will need to evolve in the coming years.

Unpacking NATO’s FLF concept

NATO’s Forward Land Forces (FLF), previously the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), aim to improve deterrence and defence on NATO’s eastern frontline. In response to Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, NATO Allies approved a Readiness Action Plan (RAP) and at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, decided to deploy eFP forces in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The first four multinational battlegroups were deployed in 2017. After Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, NATO Allies decided to establish four new multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia and to upgrade all battlegroups from battalions to brigades where and when required.²

The FLF concept is part of NATO’s collective peacetime missions and activities. It constitutes the most visible operationalization of the Alliance’s commitment to defending every inch of its territory and stopping any attack as close to the border as possible. Key elements of the concept include the roles of host and framework nations, the capabilities and forces provided to a multinational battlegroup, and the necessary command structures and staff in the form of a Multinational Staff Element (MNSE), as well as integration into NATO’s Multi-Corps-level and division-level command structures. Forces for the battlegroups are allocated by the framework nation and contributing Allies. However, beyond these broad unifying characteristics, FLFs differ in terms of force size, type of presence, and framework-nation capabilities.

2 NATO (2025) “Strengthening NATO’s eastern flank”. 23 October. <https://www.nato.int/en/what-we-do/deterrence-and-defence/strengthening-natos-eastern-flank>.

NATO’s Forward Land Forces are a key element of its collective deterrence and defence efforts on the eastern frontline.³ They enhance the interoperability of allied forces, exercise the implementation of regional defence plans, act as first responders in the event of hostilities, and signal resolve to counter military provocations with a unified response, rather than placing the onus solely on individual countries.

After Finland and Sweden joined NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively, a debate emerged over whether NATO’s presence should be expanded to the northeastern flank. FLF Finland is the ninth FLF and covers a crucial part of the European Arctic, located in the vicinity of the Kola Peninsula, a strategically important area for Russia.

“Sweden’s geographical location, experience of military cooperation with Finland, and Arctic expertise make it a fitting framework nation for FLF Finland.”

Finnish–Swedish defence cooperation as the backbone of FLF Finland

Unlike its closest frontline-state peers, Finland was initially uninterested in hosting an FLF after joining NATO.⁴ However, when weighed against the alternative of deploying large numbers of Finnish troops elsewhere in the Alliance, national defence was prioritized.⁵ In other words, the decision to establish FLF Finland was mainly motivated by political-strategic and operational considerations. However, some domestic actors may have favoured a stronger role for the United States or major European powers at the core of the force.

Strategically, FLF Finland complements NATO’s overall posture on its eastern and northern frontlines

3 NATO Shape (2026) “NATO’s Forward Land Forces”. <https://shape.nato.int/efp>; NATO 2025 “Strengthening NATO’s eastern flank”.

4 Stenroos, Maria (2024) “Maajoukkojen tuloa Suomeen valmistellaan, suurlähettiläs: ‘On Naton etu olla sotilaallisesti läsnä Suomessa’”. Yle, 29 August. <https://yle.fi/a/74-20107588>.

5 Pelli, Petja (2024) “Ministeri Häkkinen: Suomi ei lähetä maavoimia Nato-maihin, koska niitä tarvitaan täällä”. Helsingin Sanomat, 13 November. <https://www.hs.fi/politiikka/art-2000010831545.html>.

with Russia. Placing combat-ready battlegroups in or near frontline states from the North to the Black Sea allows NATO to adjust its deterrence and defence posture flexibly. FLF Finland operates in a threat environment that may become more demanding over time, as Russia has stated it will increase its military presence in the north in the future.

Operationally, FLF Finland will form the first response force in Finnish Lapland together with national forces. The concept enables Allies to plan and exercise their forces to operate in northern Finland, while also facilitating the seamless movement of forces across northern Sweden and Norway. This distinguishes FLF Finland from other FLFs, where the geographic distances between the host nation, framework nation and troop-contributing nations are typically greater. The concept also facilitates planning for military mobility investments in the north.⁶ Organizationally, the MNSE in Rovaniemi will integrate the forces into NATO's overall command and control structures and support the planning of exercises and the reinforcement of forces when necessary.

Sweden's geographical location, experience of military cooperation with Finland, and Arctic expertise make it a fitting framework nation for FLF Finland. Historically, the countries' bilateral relations have sometimes been strained by diverging strategic choices and mutual concerns about policy transparency.⁷ Nevertheless, the Finnish-Swedish partnership now rests on solid established structures, practical experience, and deep bilateral ties.

Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, both countries sought closer defence cooperation with partners such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Germany. FISE cooperation became the most important partnership for both countries due to their military non-alignment, similar threat perceptions, and shared geography, as well as the lack of politically feasible alternatives. The partnership has evolved over the years through joint planning, training, and interoperability,

resulting in mutual trust. Within the FISE framework, Sweden and Finland have also conducted exercises involving the deployment of a mechanized brigade from northern Sweden to northern Finland.

It was natural for Sweden to accept the Finnish request to act as framework nation.⁸ Geostrategic realities and the history of FISE meant that contributing to the FLF was in Sweden's interest. At the same time, the role is a significant commitment for a country of Sweden's size, given that it is already contributing a reduced battalion of some 600 troops to the FLF in Latvia. These simultaneous FLF contributions will force the Swedish Army to scale back its ambitions in other areas. While recruitment for FLF Finland is said to be going relatively well, it remains challenging, and salaries for enlisted soldiers have been increased along the way to attract more recruits.⁹ Indeed, the Swedish decision reflects a strategic culture inclined to attempt to punch above its weight. By taking on the role of framework nation, Sweden signals its willingness to share responsibility and recognizes that the task would have been even more demanding for Allies located further from the region.

FLF Finland also offers a cost-effective solution for militarily capable but economically constrained Finland. Rovaniemi is located about a four-hour drive from Boden, which means that troops can benefit from geographical proximity to compensate for the absence of a permanent in-country presence and rely on the existing host-nation infrastructure and facilities. At the same time, infrastructure needs will require Finland, Sweden and Norway to invest further in military mobility. In Finland, the government plans to invest EUR 120 million in roads, bridges and railways identified as critical for defence. Economic considerations also influence the chosen model, which aligns with Finland and Sweden's generally frugal economic posture and enables deployments over relatively short distances at limited cost.

Sweden and Finland have both championed the flexible model and secured NATO's support. Both countries argue that military considerations are most prominent in that deterrence comes first, and the

6 Government of Finland (2026) "Orpo Government: Uncertain times call for measures to build confidence and boost growth". <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/orpo-government-uncertain-times-call-for-measures-to-build-confidence-and-boost-growth-1>.

7 Huhtanen, Jarmo (2024) "Orpon väite Ruotsista 'ilmiselvänä toivekumppanina' Natossa on vähintään epäilyttävä". Helsingin Sanomat, 27 September. <https://www.hs.fi/suomi/art-2000010714538.html>.

8 Regeringskansliet (2026) "Nu tar vi nästa steg att stärka försvaret i norr", 10 April. <https://www.regeringen.se/debattartiklar/2026/04/nu-tar-vi-nasta-steg-att-starka-forsvaret-i-norr/>.

9 Sundgren 2026.

flexible model has been judged satisfactory compared to the alternatives. However, the two countries may have also preferred flexibility to make use of existing infrastructure and basing options and reduce the burden on already strained armies. Furthermore, given the two countries' history of seeking low tensions with Russia, albeit in different ways, it may be that refraining from stationing foreign troops in the vicinity of the Finnish-Russian border was preferred as long as it did not come at the expense of deterrence.

At its core, FLF Finland benefits from the fact that the defence of Finland is a vital Swedish interest in its own right, in addition to the more general need for solidarity and shared risk within the Alliance. This may allow for a more flexible model, especially when supported by close historical, political and military ties. Basing the force in Boden can also provide strategic depth for NATO, while at the same time presenting new logistical challenges.

However, while Finland and Sweden see many advantages in the design of FLF Finland, this view has not been universally shared among all NATO countries. Some FLF host nations have been concerned that the greater flexibility granted to FLF Finland might also encourage other framework nations to also seek less constraining solutions, including a reduced troop presence. The Baltic countries in particular have expressed a general sense of unease. They are concerned that deepening Nordic cooperation within NATO might result in a weakened commitment to the Baltic Sea and preparations for a Nordic-only "plan B" in the event of NATO's decline.¹⁰ This is something that Finland and Sweden will likely be forced to monitor continuously.

Comparing FLF Finland with the FLFs in the Baltic countries

While FLF Finland builds on existing FISE cooperation, it also allows Finland and Sweden to play a significant role in NATO's multinational forward defence on the northeastern flank. This is particularly important given the regional operating environment: as bordering countries at NATO's northeastern frontline, Finland, Sweden and Norway all operate in cold-climate and dark-weather conditions, with limited logistical support for troops, requiring capabilities that relatively few NATO countries possess.

Host nation Finland brings substantial expertise in winter combat operations. FLF Finland is supported in its functions by the Finnish Defence Forces' Jaeger Brigade based in Sodankylä, the country's leading unit in sub-Arctic training and winter warfare. As the northernmost brigade-level unit of the Finnish Defence Forces, it provides the necessary infrastructure, training ranges, shared facilities, and logistical support for the FLF, buttressed by the command and control provided by the MNSE based in Rovaniemi.

Initially, the Swedish battlegroup will be a mechanized unit planned to comprise 600 personnel, capable of sub-Arctic operations and operating Leopard 2A5 tanks, CV90 infantry fighting vehicles, and Archer self-propelled howitzers. However, the type of units will vary in the coming years.¹¹

Furthermore, common NATO and other allied exercises, such as the Norway-led Cold Response exercise series, enable both Finland and Sweden to contribute further to NATO's deterrence and defence posture in the European Arctic. For instance, by exercising the large-scale movement of forces from Sweden to northern Finland, Cold Response 26 demonstrated elements of FLF employment.¹²

10 Frelin, Jan, Elin Jakobsson, and Anna Löfström Svedin (2025) "NATO's Forward Land Forces – A new type of international military operation for Sweden". FOI Memo 8930, September. <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20Memo%208930>; Lawrence, Tony et al. (2024) "5. Challenges and Risks". The Newest Allies: Finland and Sweden in NATO, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), pp. 24–34. https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2024/03/icds_Report_The_Newest_Allies_Lawrence_Jermalavicius_Hyllander_March_2024.pdf.

11 Sundgren, Linda (2025) "FLF Finland blir en oerhört potent enhet", Officerstidningen. <https://officerstidningen.se/flf-finland-blir-en-oerhort-potent-enhet/> and Regeringen, 20 October 2025; The Swedish Government (2026) Svenskt bidrag till Natos framskjutna närvaro i Finland (Prop 2025/26:220). <https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/938d1ff20ae64275b3e4e5091749d1a0/svenskt-bidrag-till-natos-framskjutna-narvaro-i-finland-prop.-202526220>.

12 Finnish Army (2026) "Exercise Cold Response 26 with 7,500 soldiers will affect traffic in Finland". 4 March. <https://maavoimat.fi/en/-/exercise-cold-response-26-with-7-500-soldiers-will-affect-traffic-in-finland>.

Comparison of FLF Finland with Forward Land Forces in the Baltic countries

	FLF Estonia	FLF Latvia	FLF Lithuania	FLF Finland
Framework nation	United Kingdom	Canada	Germany	Sweden
Type of presence	In-place battlegroup, stand-by brigade	Rotating brigade (2 battalions in place, 1 on stand-by)	Permanent brigade (from 2027)	In-place staff element, stand-by battlegroup, TBD
Number of contributing countries	2 (United Kingdom, France)	13 (Canada, Albania, Czechia, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden)	7 (Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, Czechia, Croatia, Luxembourg)	1 (Sweden), <i>United Kingdom, France, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Denmark</i> ***
Type of units	Mechanized battlegroup, infantry brigade (2 UK infantry battalions, 1 French battalion)	Mechanized brigade (1 multinational mechanized battlegroup, 1 Danish/Swedish mechanized battalion, 1 Canadian infantry battalion)	Armoured brigade (1 multinational mechanized battlegroup, 1 German armoured battalion, 1 German mechanized battalion)	Mechanized battlegroup
Key capabilities	MBTs*, IFVs**, artillery, short-range air defence, rocket artillery	MBTs, IFVs, artillery, short-range air defence	MBTs, IFVs, artillery	MBTs, IFVs, artillery, short-range air defence
Divisional HQ	Host nation (Estonia)	Multinational (Denmark, Latvia)	Framework nation (Germany)	Framework nation (Sweden)

* MBT = main battle tank

** IFV = infantry fighting vehicle

*** Countries that have indicated an interest in contributing to the development of FLF Finland.

Table 1. Comparison of FLF Finland with Forward Land Forces in the Baltic countries.

Source: Jakob Gustafsson and Eva Hagström Frisell, *A New Generation of Forward Defence – NATO in the Baltic states*, FOI Reports FOI-R--5765--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2025) and authors' data collection.

Cold Response 26 was also included in NATO's Arctic Sentry activity.¹³

The sub-Arctic conditions of northern Scandinavia naturally affect which countries and units can

make substantial contributions. For now, the United Kingdom, Italy, France, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland have announced their interest in contributing to FLF Finland. However, specific contributions will be announced in the coming years and may range from sending staff officers to the MNSE and participating in exercises to more demanding contributions such as pledging combat units to the battlegroup and as part of the reinforcements intended to scale the battlegroup to a brigade when required. Notably, what "contributing to FLF Finland" means

13 Ministry of Defence of Finland (2026) Joint statement on Cold Response 26 and NATO's Forward Land Forces in Finland by the Ministers of Defence of Finland, Sweden and Norway. 16 March. <https://defmin.fi/en/-/joint-statement-on-cold-response-26-and-nato-s-forward-land-forces-in-finland-by-the-ministers-of-defence-of-finland-sweden-and-norway#bf46b1cf>.

may be interpreted differently by different actors. Traditionally, only sending personnel to the MNSE, combat forces, and reinforcements would qualify as full contributions. Given the broad interest among other Allies in using the unique exercise opportunities in northern Scandinavia, Finland and Sweden may come to prioritize FLF contributors in their exercise schedules.

The fundamentals of FLF Finland are similar to those of the existing FLFs. All nine are guided by the Alliance's concept, adhere to the same guidelines on force composition, posture, and readiness, and are part of NATO's operational plans. However, each force is tailored to the unique circumstances of its host nation and area of operations, allowing leeway for different solutions while meeting NATO's guidance, framework nation's political and military considerations, and the host nation's preferences.

This can be illustrated by comparing FLF Finland with its closest neighbours – the FLFs in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – as shown in Table 1. These FLFs differ in terms of type of presence, number of contributing countries, type of units, key capabilities, and command and control arrangements.

Previous research has noted these differences and categorized the FLFs into three distinct models:¹⁴

- a stand-by model, with a multinational battlegroup deployed in-country and brigade-sized reinforcements on stand-by at home (FLF Estonia, the UK as framework nation);
- a rotational model, with a reduced brigade (including a multinational battlegroup) rotationally deployed in-country (FLF Latvia, Canada as framework nation);
- a permanent model, with permanently deployed battalions in-country complementing a rotationally deployed multinational battlegroup (FLF Lithuania, Germany as framework nation).

FLF Finland represents a separate, fourth model. Its battlegroup will be neither multinational at first nor deployed in-country. This model makes sense in light of the geographical, military and political proximity of the framework nation and host nation, which allows Finland and Sweden to fulfil the FLF requirements by different means.

“Overall, FLF Finland provides a useful platform that will be further adapted over time and that complements NATO’s deterrence and defence posture along the northeastern frontline. “

Conclusions

Finland and Sweden have opted to build the track while running the train, meaning that FLF Finland will need to evolve in the coming years to remain relevant and attuned to the threat. Initially, the model will be more reminiscent of NATO's enhanced Forward Presence construct, from which the FLF evolved, with its focus on a high-readiness battlegroup and an extensive exercise regime. It follows the core features of NATO's FLF concept but is adapted to the regional needs and operating environment in Finland, Sweden and Norway. Likewise, the capacity of framework nation Sweden to provide available troops, as well as the availability of high-readiness units among other Allies, will inevitably impact the future composition of the force. This may change in the years to come but could partly explain why the battlegroup, at least for the first rotation, is entirely Swedish.¹⁵

FLF Finland will shift the relationship between Finland and Sweden from one of equal and independent partners to a dynamic between host nation and framework nation. Each role entails externally defined needs and obligations, with the framework nation leading in many ways. Such differences could potentially give rise to tensions in the future.

14 Gustafsson, Jakob and Eva Hagström Frisell (2025) A New Generation of Forward Defence – NATO in the Baltic states, FOI Reports FOI-R--5765--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2025).

15 Ottosson, Björn and Krister Pallin, eds. (2024) Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2023, Part I: National Capabilities, FOI Reports FOI-R--5527--SE (Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency—FOI, 2024).

As the security environment in Northern Europe continues to evolve, it may become necessary in the future to consider deploying the battlegroup permanently on Finnish territory. Changes in the strategic environment – for instance, the eventual end of the war in Ukraine – could also affect the rationale and future configuration of the deployment.

While military factors appear to be driving the deployment of FLF Finland, political considerations in Finland and Sweden will affect its development. Possible factors could include the balance between deterrence and reassurance in relation to Russia, national economic outlooks, the trajectory of relations with Washington, and the future development of NORDEFCO. Overall, FLF Finland provides a useful platform that will be further adapted over time and that complements NATO's deterrence and defence posture along the northeastern frontline. 🟡

BRIEFING
PAPER

439

June 2026

ISBN 978-951-769-859-7

ISSN 1795-8059

Language editing: Lynn Nikkanen

Graphics: FIIA

Cover photo: NATO

This publication is part of the “Finland as NATO’s frontline state” research project, funded by the Scientific Advisory Board for Defence (MATINE) under the Ministry of Defence of Finland. The publication has also been supported by the Swedish Defence Research Agency’s (FOI) programme on Northern European and Transatlantic Security (NOTS), commissioned by the Swedish Ministry of Defence.

FIIA
FINNISH
INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL
AFFAIRS

Arkadiankatu 23 b
POB 425 / 00101 Helsinki
Telephone +358 (0)9 432 7799
www.fii.fi

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs is an independent research institute that produces high-level research to support political decisionmaking and public debate both nationally and internationally.

All manuscripts are reviewed by at least two other experts in the field to ensure the high quality of the publications. In addition, publications undergo professional language checking and editing. The responsibility for the views expressed ultimately rests with the authors.

While all FIIA publications are freely accessible, they may not be republished, in whole or in part, without prior written permission from the Institute.

