

Policy commentary

Matti Pesu¹*Finnish Institute on International Affairs*

Finland in NATO: an emerging Nordic-Atlantic orientation?

Introduction

After Finland formally achieved NATO membership on 4 April 2023, Helsinki's focus has been on establishing its role within the Alliance. This effort centres on several concrete questions ranging from Finland's contribution to the NATO New Force Model to creating desirable command and control arrangements in Northern Europe. Furthermore, NATO membership has unlocked significant new potential for military cooperation with allies outside NATO's framework (Iso-Markku & Pesu, 2024; Särkkä et al, 2024), substantially influencing Finland's role in the collective defence of Europe.

Finland, like other NATO allies, has notable autonomy in determining its role within the alliance. NATO comprises 32 members, each with unique threat perceptions, strategic cultures and military capabilities (Tardy, 2022; Linnainmäki, 2024). This diversity results in a range of orientations within the Alliance. Allies closer to Russia typically emphasise deterrence and defence as NATO's core mission, whereas those further from Russia are generally less concerned with the threat posed by Moscow.

Finland's evolving orientation within NATO is primarily shaped by its geography and military- strategic realities. Specifically, its NATO policy is influenced by four geographical factors (Pesu & Iso-Markku,

¹ *Matti Pesu*, a senior research fellow at Finnish Institute on International Affairs, Helsinki, Finland; e-mail: matti.pesu@fiia.fi.

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2022, p. 16):

1. Finland is a Baltic Sea state.
2. Finland is an Arctic country.
3. Finland is a frontline state sharing a long border with Russia.
4. Finland is peripherally located relative to the Western reserves of military and industrial power.

Despite the importance of these strategic factors, Finnish NATO policy is also influenced by political considerations, including national identity (Särkkä, 2023), which will guide Finland's future strategic decisions.

The key argument of this commentary is that Finland is currently adopting a Nordic-Atlantic orientation within NATO. This approach is largely driven by the strategic factors mentioned earlier. However, this Nordic-Atlantic focus does not mean that Finland is neglecting the Baltic Sea region or its Baltic allies. On the contrary, Finland maintains significant security interests in the Baltic Sea area.

Finland's embryonic Nordic-Atlantic orientation

Finland's emerging Nordic-Atlantic orientation within the Alliance is evident both within NATO structures and outside its framework. Within NATO, Finland – like other Nordic countries – will be affiliated with the Joint Forces Command (JFC) Norfolk, one of NATO's three operational-level headquarters alongside JFC Brunssum and JFC Naples.

Finland's association with JFC Norfolk is motivated by several strategic factors. In the event of a conflict in Northern Europe, potential allied reinforcements would primarily arrive in Finland via Norway and Sweden. Strategically, Finland, particularly its northern regions, is closely connected to the security dynamics of the European Arctic. It is situated between the waters of the Northern Atlantic and the Kola Peninsula, a Russian strategic hotspot. From NATO's perspective, Finland serves as a territorial extension of the northern Atlantic, and the defence of this vital maritime area begins in Finnish Lapland. An association with JFC Norfolk would also integrate Finland into NATO's Regional Plan North (NATO, 2023).

Other strategic and political factors also support Finland's alignment with JFC Norfolk. Finnish policymakers believe that

placement under a US-based command could foster a stronger Finnish–US relationship. Additionally, although the headquarters in Virginia has a strong naval focus, Finnish military officials are confident that building the command’s land warfare capacity from scratch presents Finland with an opportunity to influence its development. Furthermore, the preference of other Nordic countries for the Norfolk affiliation likely influenced Finland’s decision. Nordic-ness remains a strong element of Finnish national identity, and some policymakers view the association with JFC Norfolk as more politically natural than placement under JFC Brunssum.

Finland’s nascent Nordic-Atlantic orientation is also evident in the way it is currently developing its military partnerships. In this respect, Finland’s four most important allies are Sweden, Norway, the United States and the United Kingdom.

In December 2023, Finland and the United States signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement, granting the US access to 15 facilities and areas within Finland (Gosselin-Malo, 2023). As part of this agreement, Finland anticipates hosting a significant amount of US defence material, including JASSM, Sidewinder and AMRAAM missiles for Finnish fighter aircraft, as well as ammunition for heavy rocket launchers (Huhtanen, 2024). Additionally, Finland is considering hosting allied, preferably American, military forces through extended military exercises or a rotational model (Yle News, 2024).

Moreover, Helsinki has entered into several agreements with the United Kingdom, including a joint declaration on strategic partnership signed in May 2024. An earlier bilateral security statement from May 2022 states that ‘should either country suffer a disaster or an attack, the United Kingdom and Finland will, upon request from the affected country, assist each other in a variety of ways, which may include military means’ (United Kingdom – Finland Statement, 2022). The statement was a significant reassurance measure during Finland’s delicate NATO membership process, bolstering the UK’s image as a credible security provider.

Finland is also investing in its military partnerships with Sweden and Norway. Extensive Nordic military cooperation reached a new level following Finland’s and Sweden’s admission into the alliance. The trio can now exchange information and carry out joint operations planning without restrictions; there is also a strong emphasis on improving infrastructure and logistics. However, Nordic cross-border

connectivity, particularly in the West–East direction, remains relatively poor and insufficient for supporting significant military deployments (see e.g. Moregård, 2024, p. 4). Improving cross-border infrastructure is a significant priority for Finland. As a potential recipient of allied reinforcements, it is particularly mindful of military mobility. Furthermore, improving connective infrastructure in northern Fennoscandia could also alleviate its significant dependency on the supply routes of the Baltic Sea.

Several other underlying factors also drive Finland's effort to deepen its defence ties with its Nordic neighbours. Both Sweden and Norway provide Finland with additional strategic depth for capability dispersal. For instance, Finland has begun stockpiling ammunition and equipment in Norway in preparation for potential crises, with similar cooperation planned with Sweden (Milne, 2024). Beyond serving as hubs and rear areas (Pesu, 2023), Sweden and Norway are also relatively capable military powers that could reinforce Finland in a conflict, particularly in the sea and air domains. Additionally, Nordic cooperation facilitates broader allied operations in Finland, as it would be challenging to reinforce Finland militarily without the consent and support of Sweden and Norway.

The Baltic (Sea) direction

Finland's (and Sweden's) visible efforts to bolster Nordic cooperation have raised concerns in the Baltic states. This has been flagged as a potential risk to Baltic deterrence and defence. The Nordic preference for affiliating with JFC Norfolk instead of JFC Brunssum concretely embodies these concerns (Lawrence et al, 2024, p. 30–32).

Apprehension about Finland's orientation towards the Atlantic and Nordic powers is misplaced, however. The same geographic and strategic realities that direct Finland's focus westward also pull it towards the south. Indeed, Finland's view is that NATO should increasingly view Northern Europe – the Baltic Sea region and the European Arctic – as a strategic whole, and make sure that the Alliance is able to operate in the region as seamlessly as possible (Pihlajamaa & Särkkä, 2024).

Helsinki's outlook on the Baltic Sea region can be divided into two closely intertwined directions: the *Baltic Sea* itself and the Baltic

states. The Baltic Sea is a lifeline for the Finnish economy and society at large. Maritime transport accounts for 95% of Finland's foreign trade, a staggering figure that underscores Finland's indispensable dependency on the Baltic Sea. Consequently, Helsinki has an existential interest in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Baltic Sea. While Finland has considerable naval capabilities to ensure freedom of navigation in its adjacent waters, it lacks the capacity to defend the entire Baltic Sea. Therefore, it relies on its allies to secure these vital sea routes. It also cooperates extensively with Sweden regarding the naval defence of the Baltic Sea.

Finland also has a considerable security interest in the Baltic states, particularly in Estonia. It is of utmost importance for Finland that the southern coast of the Gulf of Finland – located less than 100 kilometres from Helsinki – remains in friendly hands. NATO's Forward Land Forces (FLF) in the Baltic states thus contribute to Finnish security as well. However, Finland's and Sweden's interest vis-à-vis Baltic states are different. Whereas they provide Finland some additional strategic depth, for Sweden the three nations constitute the first line of Swedish defence. This partly explains the Swedish interest to establish a foothold in Latvia's FLF mission.

Geographical distance and limited resources impose certain constraints on operational cooperation between Finland and the Baltic states. As frontline nations, their top priority is to allocate most of their resources to defend their own territories. However, tailored Fenno–Estonian cooperation on the defence of the Gulf of Finland – a regional bottleneck – may gain momentum. Such cooperation would have a historical precedent from the 1920s and 1930s when Helsinki and Tallinn were secretly preparing to close off the Gulf from the Soviet Navy (Leskinen, 1999). However, today, the effort would unlikely be purely bilateral. Unlike in the pre-war era, Finland and Estonia do not possess submarines, which certain regional allies, such as Sweden, have.

Furthermore – and importantly – within NATO decision-making, Finland and the Baltic states share a wide array of security interests, which should lead to close cooperation within the Alliance.

Regionally, they prioritise Northern Europe and consider Russia an existential threat. The quartet also strongly supports NATO's robust deterrence and defence measures. There is a growing sense in Finland that the country is indeed located on the European frontline, which will likely further bind Helsinki and its Baltic allies together. Finnish decision makers see collaboration with the Baltic states as essential.

Conclusion

This article contends that Finland is currently shifting towards a Nordic-Atlantic orientation within NATO. It has decided to align itself with the Alliance's Northern Command, JFC Norfolk, and is likely to be integrated into its Regional Plan North. Additionally, Finland is actively deepening its cooperation with Nordic and Atlantic powers, including Sweden, Norway, the United States and the United Kingdom. This orientation is primarily driven by military-strategic considerations.

However, despite this development, Finland remains committed to the Baltic Sea region and its Baltic allies. Defending the Baltic Sea and its maritime routes is a matter of existential interest for Finland. There is also significant potential for Finnish-Estonian military cooperation. Furthermore, Helsinki and its Baltic allies share a similar outlook regarding NATO's priorities and direction. This common perspective will likely foster effective cooperation within the Alliance's decision-making processes.

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