

The Finnish Defence Planning Problematique

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Finland's defence policy guidelines and defence planning principles have been subject to change in the post-Cold War era, most notably due to the changing nature of the international security environment. However, it is noteworthy that in the European context, whereas most Western states have made fundamental changes to the way in which they conceptualize international security, defence planning and the use of military force over the past 25 years, Finnish defence planning has been characterized more by continuity than change. Understanding this continuity is important when analysing recent defence policy decisions by the Finnish Government. The most recent of these is formulated in the Government Defence Report to parliament in February 2017.

THE LEGACY

“The termination of the Cold War and the altered picture of potential crises pose new questions for the defence of Finland. With the decline in the threat of a major war, its place has been taken by the existence of regional crises that are susceptible to escalation. With crises becoming more obviously internal matters for individual states or otherwise spatially restricted events, we are obliged to adjust the structure and deployment plans of our armed forces accordingly. All in all, the image of future warfare has substantially altered.”

Statement by the Parliamentary Defence Committee to the Foreign Affairs Committee, 1997

Defence planning is the sphere of politico-military activity that defines the military threats to national security and in so doing also defines the core military tasks that armed forces must be able to perform.

Defence planning is thus a politically guided process that sets priorities and allocates resources for the maintenance, development and use of military forces.

Defence planning is deeply ingrained in the strategic culture of the actor in question. Different states with different historical experiences and varying geostrategic locations have diverse ways of conceptualizing the kinds of threats that they must be prepared to counter, who or what should be protected from these threats, and what military means are effective or acceptable for doing so. In other words, how actors conceptualize war – its character, probability and goals – influences how they organize their defence planning.

During the Cold War, the foundations of Finnish defence planning were associated with the political security paradigm of neutrality and associated attempts to avoid being part of the great-power confrontation. Maintaining a defence capability to protect the territorial integrity of the country against military threats – without directly naming potential aggressors – formed the bedrock of Finland's Cold War defence policy outlook and defence planning principles.

With the demise of the superpower confrontation and the bipolar international system in the early 1990s, states and international agencies found themselves in a situation where the old rules of the international system were being questioned and ‘new’ or ‘altered’ rules had to be devised. However, this rule-changing process was not a formal one. Instead, it was a conjoined process of agent-level and system-level practices where assessments were made regarding the ending of the Cold War era, the ‘nature’ of the new international system and the policies required to promote agents’ interests in this ‘new’ – still vaguely defined – system. Similarly, actors gauged future policy prospects and formulated related vision statements and policies in order to mould the evolving system into one that would be beneficial to them. The immediate post-Cold War era was a generally acknowledged time of transition, while the end point of this process of transition was not in sight. Statesmen were making history, but not under the conditions of their own choosing.



The celebrated end of the Cold War was thus the beginning of a process – both implicit and explicit – of reconceptualising the ‘logic’ of the international system, the nature of war within it and the determinants of military power. In other words, the end of the Cold War forced a change in the logic according to which states do defence planning and maintain, develop and use their military forces.

THE POST-COLD WAR ERA

At the end of the Cold War, Finland quickly “moved to the West”. Membership of the European Union and participation in the NATO Partnership for Peace programme were the concrete manifestations of the shift in Finnish security policy outlook from neutrality to military non-alignment. Thus, in the post-Cold War era Finnish defence policy and the principles guiding defence planning have been defined in close connection – and practically within – the Western security community, while taking distinctive national features into account.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Finnish defence planning and the development of the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) followed a logic of slow evolution based on the fairly benign security environment of the post-Cold War era. Finland followed the global trend for cashing in the “peace dividend”, streamlining the FDF in terms of both its peacetime organization, infrastructure and personnel, and its wartime troop levels and readiness. But the focus of Finnish defence policy remained the prevention of any potential military threats to the nation by maintaining sufficient military capability to repel any attack, even a large-scale conventional military attack. This at a time when most states in Western Europe were transforming their defence planning guidelines in a more revolutionary way, by “going professional” and focusing on out-of-area military operations and expeditionary capabilities.

Gradually, during the first decade of the new millennium, the gap between Finnish defence planning principles and the principles of most of the other Western countries became wide enough to facilitate discussions on the benefits of continuing to rely on general male conscription and maintaining territorial defence against potential large-scale military attack as the framework through which to conceptualize and maintain defence capability.

In retrospect, it might be argued that the US-led Western transformation of the armed forces by exploiting the so-called “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA), and the move away from conscription to all-volunteer professional militaries, highlighted the fact that in the defence realm, Finland was getting “out-of-sync” with other Western states. Finland was eager to participate in the development of the European defence sphere, focused mainly on military crisis management, but was doing this on the basis of military capabilities developed solely to fit the requirements of defending its national territory against external state-based military threats. Thus, in the first decade of the new century, Finland faced an emerging “identity crisis”. Later events, however, particularly in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, quickly eased most of the concerns that had been growing for a decade and a half.

The geographical and historical relationship with Russia must be taken into account in any analysis of the differences between the Finnish defence planning principles and Western planning more generally, as exemplified by NATO. Directly after the Cold War, Russia was still a great power in a military sense, despite the fact that it had difficulties keeping the peace domestically. In addition, Russia and Finland share a common land border of more than 1000 kilometres. Finns still recall the events of the wars with the Soviet Union in 1939–1945 and the Soviet political and military pressure exerted on Finland during the Cold War. In fact, the threat posed by Russia did not completely disappear in the early 1990s, even though the security situation clearly improved relative to the decades after World War II.

“The threats to Finland are determined by the country’s geopolitical position....The only realistic direction from which a threat could arise is the east, that is from Russia.”

*LtGen (ret.) Ermei Kanninen 1994
(translation by the author)*



“Although we may not regard Russia as a threat in the political sense, Finland has to develop its defences to allow for all eventualities, including a possible change in the political situation in Russia.”

*Prime minister Paavo Lipponen, 2004
(translation by the author)*

“Russia is attempting to regain as much as possible of its leading role, resembling the influence that the Soviet Union had in Eurasia.”

*Finnish Security and Defence Policy
2004, Government report to parliament
6/2004*

In the two decades between 1992 and 2012 the peacetime structures of the Finnish Defence Forces underwent several rounds of base closures and the number of paid personnel reduced from approximately 20,000 persons to less than 15,000. At the same time, the wartime strength of the FDF was cut from 540,000 to 350,000 soldiers. The benign international security landscape facilitated the maintenance and development of a defence capability with only a moderate level of ambition. Apart from any potential risks associated with future developments in Russia, there were no significant military threats on the horizon that could be countered using the tools of the FDF. Even military crisis management was becoming a routine mission, and the number of troops deployed and the costs associated with the operations were low compared to the FDF wartime footing and the national defence budget. Procurement decisions were still being based on the logic of national territorial defence.

THE SURPRISE

Russia’s “warning shot” in Georgia in 2008 was either forgotten or ignored quite soon after by most sections of the Western security community. For Finland, the foundations of its defence planning seemed to have been vindicated post-Georgia. Having sufficient national defence capability to defend its territory and the vital functions of society was still a requirement across the globe, and even possibly in Europe. After all, the war in Georgia took place less than six months

after a NATO summit had made a vague commitment to Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO at some point in the future.

Facing economic stresses caused by the global financial crisis in 2008, and facilitated by the seemingly secure international security environment, government decisions were made in 2011–12 to undertake defence reform by 2015. The defence budget was cut by around 10 per cent. As a result, the level of procurement plummeted, the level of daily operations such as conscript training or refresher training was reduced, the number of paid personnel in the FDF was cut to 12,000 and the wartime strength of the FDF was cut from 350,000 to 230,000 soldiers. At the same time, a level of administration – Military Provinces – was cut from the organization of the defence forces and the processes and functions of the FDF were reformed. In sum, the way of doing things and the level of ambition were adjusted to the tight financial situation. The one thing that did not change was the focus of Finnish defence planning: it was still about defending the territory and vital functions of Finnish society against state-based military threats.

The crisis in Ukraine broke out during this reform process. To the surprise of almost everyone in the West, Russia invaded the Crimean peninsula and annexed it. Less than six years after the war in Georgia, Russia had succeeded in modernizing both the equipment of its armed forces and its conduct of operations. In addition, Russia also began a military conflict that was practically a proxy war in eastern Ukraine. Relations between the EU and NATO, and Russia have become extremely strained and dysfunctional. Even communication between the parties – the bedrock of diplomacy – has become cumbersome and almost impossible.

FINNISH DEFENCE POLICY TODAY

It is against this backdrop that the 2017 Government Defence Report should be evaluated. The report is the official document that will guide Finnish defence policy for many years into the future, examining the maintenance and development of defence capabilities from the perspective of the next decade. For the first time in the post-Cold War period, the document notes a deterioration in the security environment and increasing military tensions in the vicinity of Finland.



The report notes that given current circumstances, the resources assigned to military defence are inadequate. The defence capability needs to be enhanced at a greater rate than was mandated by the decisions of the 2012 defence reform. In particular, additional funds are assigned to procurement (a cumulative increase of €150 million per year) and readiness (€55 million per year). In addition, the government has stated that two projects linked to future strategic capabilities – replacing the F-18 Hornet fighter fleet and several navy ships, and capabilities connected with the Squadron 2020 project – will be funded by additional resources over and above the base budget. The projected cost of these two projects is €8.2–11.2 billion.

The report does not make any significant conceptual changes to the prevailing defence planning principles. Finland will continue to maintain and develop the defence capability to prevent state-based military threats from emerging and, if necessary, to defeat such threats. In addition, Finland will continue to deepen international defence cooperation and retains the option of applying for NATO membership. The ongoing bilateral cooperation with Sweden is raised to the top of the agenda by the government, as is cooperation with the United States. In addition, the government is removing legislative restrictions on giving or receiving international military assistance.

The change in the international security atmosphere since the annexation of Crimea has resulted in modifications to the Finnish system of national defence. These modifications, however, do not constitute a significant change in the Finnish defence policy outlook or defence planning principles that have evolved throughout the post-Cold War period. The surprise that Russia's actions gave many Western analysts and statesmen early in 2014 – in Finland also - did not result in a need to re-examine Finnish defence policy or the principles on which Finland's defence is maintained and developed. Whether this is due to the strategic competence of Finnish defence policymakers or the effects of inertia in decision-making over the past 25 years is a question best left for future analysis and political debate.