

Guardians of the North:

The Finnish Army Improves Readiness and Mobility to Counter Hybrid Threats

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As Finland celebrates 100 years of independence, its army is sharpening its ability to counter rapidly emerging threats. This involves prolonging the length of service of some conscripts by putting them under contract to create rapid reaction units, speeding up the mobilization of certain ground units and deepening cooperation with the paramilitary Finnish Border Guard. While still a work in progress, recent exercises suggest that the Finnish Army is arguably better positioned to tackle hybrid threats than most of its European counterparts.

Following a significant deterioration in the security situation in the Baltic Sea region over the past five years, the Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) have been tasked with improving readiness and shortening mobilization times. While its Nordic neighbours have shifted to smaller, lighter professional forces more suited to expeditionary peacekeeping, the Finnish Army has maintained a large reserve force based on conscription, and focused on territorial defence. The FDF therefore have a wartime personnel of 280,000, which includes sizable ground forces equipped with substantial artillery, mechanized battalions and armoured personnel carriers (APCs). After mobilization, these forces consist of three tiers: operational forces, with a strength of 32,000 soldiers; regional troops providing the backbone of territorial defence with 96,000 soldiers; and local forces of 32,000 soldiers tasked with defending military sites and critical infrastructure.¹ The operational forces form the centre of gravity of the army, have the most modern equipment and are organized into one mechanized brigade, one motorized brigade, two mechanized battle

¹ Beyond the Army, other large components of the FDF after mobilization would include the Navy, the Air force, the Finnish Border Guard, and the FDF mobilization organization.

groups, two motorized battle groups, one helicopter battalion and Special Forces.

The reason why the FDF chose to maintain this model while its Nordic neighbours jumped on the expeditionary bandwagon is not hard to see. Sharing a 1340km border with Russia, the need for large ground forces is self-explanatory. Furthermore, memories of World War II – in which over 2 per cent of the population perished in two brutal wars with the Soviet Union – are very much alive in Finland.

An army built on a small standing force backed by conscripts and the large-scale mobilization of reservists, however, leaves the need for strategic warning and time to mobilize as key vulnerabilities. When the armed forces underwent comprehensive cost-cutting reforms in 2012–2015, the readiness of the Army suffered temporarily. In fact, at the time of Russia's annexation of Crimea, the army could reportedly only field "a few platoon-sized elements of Special Forces soldiers" at short notice. In August 2017, the Minister of Defence, Jussi Niinistö, noted that the Achilles heel of the Finnish armed forces was the time needed for mobilization. While the Finnish Navy and Air Force have a large proportion of professional soldiers, less than 10 per cent of the Army's war-time organization is made up of full-time soldiers and conscripts taken together. Furthermore, until recently, existing legislation was interpreted as meaning that conscripts could not be put in harm's way.

The lessons from Crimea were by no means lost on the Finnish defence establishment. Since 2014, improving the readiness of the Finnish Army has been a major priority. A government Defence White Paper of February 2017 outlines a system of rapid reaction forces and swift-mobilization units among all services and troop types. At the time of publication, a system for training conscripts to form part of the rapid

reaction forces had already begun to be implemented. Furthermore, the main task of the armed forces shifted from training to readiness. Existing legislation was also reinterpreted, to the effect that conscripts who had received sufficient training could participate in countering rapidly emerging threats on Finnish soil. By 2017, close observers were claiming that readiness had dramatically improved, and the Finnish army was now able to field “thousands of soldiers” within hours². Exactly which army units were maintaining such a high degree of readiness, however, was not specified. Nor were the capabilities that they could field at short notice.

EXERCISES AND DEMONSTRATED CAPABILITIES

Recent exercises have demonstrated the improved readiness of the Finnish Army and shed light on the capabilities available in the event of swiftly arising crises. Building on its conscript service, the army has created rapid reaction forces that are known locally as ‘readiness units’ (Fi: *valmiusyksitöt*). These units consist mainly of conscripts who, on completion of their regular conscript training cycle of six months, enter into readiness unit training and a readiness phase of a further six months. Because the training of Finnish conscripts begins twice a year, in January and July, this means that there are periods (in roughly the first and third quarter of the year) when there are “no adequately trained conscripts”. The readiness units are used to plug this gap. Led by professional soldiers, they receive training on additional weapon systems (including anti-tank weapons), advanced small unit tactics, urban operations and heliborne insertion/extraction. At least some of the readiness units are equipped with Leopard 2A6 tanks, and tanks have been used in several readiness exercises. The defence blogger Robin Häggblom (better known by his nom de plume Corporal Frisk) has argued that readiness units are “equipped to be able to counter the whole

spectrum of modern military threats”³.

The Finnish Army is organized around seven brigade-level regiments. All the army brigade-level units apart from the Utti Jaeger Regiment train readiness units. These account for some 10 per cent of each cohort of conscripts, which suggests that they number some 1100 conscripts in total. If they were equally distributed, the readiness units would constitute a company-sized unit based in each of the brigade-level regiments. However, it is more likely that unit sizes are larger in the largest brigade-level regiments, i.e. Pori, Karelia and Kainuu. That said, the units are geographically dispersed throughout Finland.



As the readiness unit concept was incorporated into conscript training only in 2017, exercises in the

² Charly Salonijs-Pasternak, 2017 “Securing Finland: The Finnish Defence Forces are Again Focused on Readiness” FIIA Comment 13, May 18th 2017.

³ Robin Häggblom, 2017 “Little Green Tanks” Corporal Frisk blog, October 17 2017.

past year offered the first opportunity to study their capabilities. Footage from the Kymi 118 exercise conducted by the Karelia Brigade, for instance, shows the use of anti-tank weapons, CV90s, APCs, Leopard tanks and combined arms fire. The analyst Charly Salenius-Pasternak has claimed that the FDF readiness units “are the cutting edge in Europe, in terms of delivering combat power in a few hours”. Readiness units also train for joint operations, such as Uusima 17. This exercise involved some 9,000 personnel from the army, navy and air force, with a full set of the most modern equipment from each branch of the FDF. Together with agencies such as the police and the Finnish Border Guard (FBG), they exercised defending Helsinki during a complex and fast-escalating crisis.

Other exercises in which readiness units have played a prominent role include Oulu 17, Lappi 18 and Vasa 18. It is notable that these exercises often include elements of cooperation with local army troops, the police and the FBG, using scenarios that cover a substantial part of the conflict intensity scale. Thus, readiness units and the exercises in which they participate represent the army’s response to ‘quickly escalating crises’, a euphemism for hybrid warfare. With their rapid reaction times and helicopter mobility, readiness units can be deployed nationally and have sufficient independent firepower and endurance to engage even a well-armed adversary. As Häggblom argues, their firepower is intended to raise the bar sufficiently to make hybrid attacks less attractive. While fairly small in number, the readiness units have been structured to be financially sustainable over time (with some €50 million having been set aside to improve readiness). Some however question whether the continuous use of heavy equipment will increase wear and tear, and hence costs, over time.

REDISCOVERING RAPID MOBILIZATION

While the readiness units to some extent represent an innovative response to an emerging threat, other elements of the army’s improved readiness build on older models that had been temporarily discontinued. The clearest example is the rapid mobilization units

within the larger brigade-level units. These consist of three readiness brigades, set up by the Pori, Karelia and Kainuu brigades. Beyond this, the defense white paper from 2017 mandated that such units should be available within all three branches of the FDF, and within different types of army units; that is, the operational, regional and local units.

Another element of the readiness of the Finnish Army is its close cooperation with the paramilitary FBG. In peacetime, the FBG is a civilian agency subordinate to the Ministry of the Interior. In wartime, however, it is to be incorporated into the FDF. According to the White Paper, the “high readiness, mandate and capabilities” of the FBG support the FDF in safeguarding territorial integrity⁴. FBG officers are trained alongside their military counterparts and in turn train conscripts to conduct “special forces activities and reconnaissance”. Its 2700 active duty personnel, situational awareness, light weaponry and mobility—involving the use of transport helicopters, among other things—make it clear that the FBG would be an excellent supplement to the FDF in the event of a crisis. Notably, the FBG is also permitted to visit the demilitarized and strategically vital Åland Islands in peacetime.

STILL A WORK IN PROGRESS

Taken together, readiness units, speedier mobilization of reservist units and closer cooperation with the FBG mean that the Finnish Army has taken important steps to improve its ability to react to a quickly emerging crises. In fact, some close observers in Finland as well as abroad claim that the Finnish Army has become among the best in Europe at delivering sizable combat power at short notice. Similarly, Häggblom argues that the FDF “is able to field a layered approach to any threat which might appear suddenly”⁵. While such claims are hard to verify independently, it is clear that the FDF have learned the lessons of Crimea and are currently on their way to implementing a realistic solution.

⁴ Prime Minister’s Office, 2017 Government’s Defence Report Prime Minister’s Office Publications 2017/07, February 16 2017, 20.

⁵ Robin Häggblom, 2017 “Little Green Tanks” Corporal Frisk blog, October 17 2017.



Nonetheless, modernizing the Finnish Army is a huge task and remains a work in progress. The combination of a large conscript army and a limited procurement budget means that parts of its materiel are becoming outdated, or are not available in sufficient quantities. While the army has a sizable artillery component (with almost 700 pieces, by one count), almost half are towed and many were originally designed in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s. The army procured 48 K9 self-propelled artillery systems in 2017, however, markedly improving its manoeuvrability and firepower. Similarly, the army is upgrading a substantial number of its APCs and infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs). Some of these acquisitions are driven by materiel reaching the end of its life cycle, while others are driven by lessons from Ukraine, such as the need to better protect infantry personnel from artillery barrages.

Some close observers argue that the current focus on readiness units and rapid mobilization units has meant that the training of reservists has been put on the back burner. Others note the possible need for a large-scale readiness exercise to test the whole system rather than, as now, testing it piecemeal in smaller exercises. Inspired by Sweden's Aurora exercise (in which some 20,000 personnel from all three branches participated), Finland recently announced that it would host a similar exercise in 2021. While the details are still unconfirmed, several European and North American partners are likely to participate.

THE LEGACIES OF WAR, SCARCELY FORGOTTEN

Having suffered through two devastating wars with the Soviet Union, it is not surprising that Finns were reluctant to dismantle their territorial defence capabilities. Another legacy of those wars may be a perceived need to project an image of military strength and capability in order to avoid being underestimated. While Finnish foreign policy has traditionally been understandably respectful of Russia, there are some signs that the Finnish authorities are stepping up their strategic communication. In 2015, for instance, in a move that garnered international attention, 900,000 reservists were contacted to inform them of their role

in the event of a war. Furthermore, when confirming the full operational capability of its JASSM missiles through a live-fire exercise in California, the targets used bore notable similarities to S400 and Iskander units. Finally, the 2017 Defence White Paper nominally expanded the war-time organization of the FDF from 230,000 to 280,000, while in practice primarily shifting the FBG and the FDF mobilization organization into its personnel count. While the significance of these moves should not be exaggerated, taken together they seem intended to signal capability and determination to defend Finland.

Through its improvements in readiness, the Finnish Army has taken important steps to address its Achilles heel, even if some reports may have been highlighted for dramatic effect. Undeniably, the difficult work of maintaining and improving capabilities and modernizing materiel under budget constraints remains a work in progress. Even so, that a country of 5 million people is able to field the largest ground forces in northern Europe with the exception of Russia is understandably a source of pride, and increasingly, reassuring to its neighbours.