CSS Analysis in Security Policy

CSS ETH Zurich

No. 68 • February 2010

FINLAND: CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND TERRITORIAL DEFENCE

Since the end of the Cold War, Finland's security and defence policy has undergone significant changes. EU membership as well as convergence with NATO have supplemented Finland's traditional involvement in UN missions. They are the visible reflection of an intensified strategy of cooperation, which is also seen in Finland's participation in international crisis management. The country's self-perception continues to be shaped by the experience of history, its immediate proximity to Russia, and its geostrategic situation in the Northeast of Europe.

Encounter in Kabul: Finland's involvement in international crisis management includes operations in Afghanistan.

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a decisive caesura for Finland. During the East-West conflict, the small Nordic country had taken a stance marked by armed neutrality, the "Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance" with the Soviet Union (1948–1991), and a narrowly defined range of foreign- and security-policy options. The geopolitical upheavals 20 years ago triggered a debate in Finland on the country's alignment in security policy and its neutrality. Helsinki conducted a reappraisal of threats and risks that was reflected in institutional changes and adjustments in its defence policy. In 1992, the principle of neutrality was replaced by military non-alignment and a strategy of cooperation. In 1995, Finland joined the EU.

Since the 1990s, Finland has been increasingly engaged in international crisis management. In government circles, the conviction prevails that modern-day multidimensional crises and conflicts demand a comprehensive response on the part of the international community in which civilian and military activities are coordinated. This belief is also expressed in the White Paper on "Finnish Security and Defence Policy" of February 2009, which is based on a comprehensive conception of security. According to this key document, Finland's national interests can be advanced most effectively by means of multilateral cooperation. At the same time, Finland continues to adhere to its traditional notion of territorial defence and general conscription based on a large pool of reserves – a concept that has developed organically since World War II. The core pillars of Finnish security policy are therefore military non-alignment, autonomous defence, EU membership, and participation in international crisis management. The resulting tension between an increasingly multilateral course of action and the traditional conception of defence is diminished by a structural modernisation of the armed forces that involves a centralisation of the command structure and a downsizing of the military.

Institutionalised Cooperation Strategy

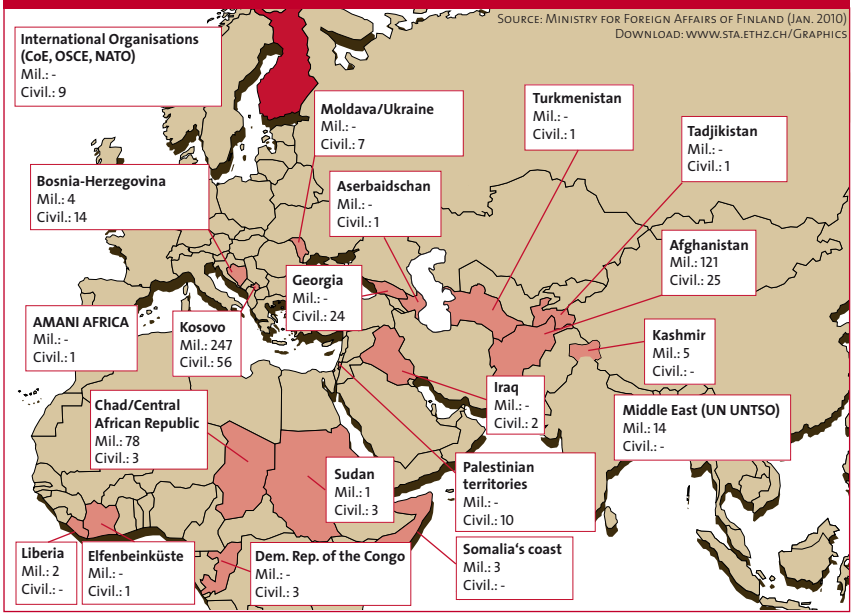
Finland's strategy of cooperation is clearly seen in its participation in international crisis management. Finland makes a significant contribution to crisis operations conducted by the UN, the EU, the OSCE, and increasingly by NATO. Approximately 475 Finnish military experts are currently deployed abroad, including 247 in Kosovo (KFOR) and about 121 in Afghanistan (ISAF). The Finnish contingents are mainly composed of reservists and are all-volunteer units. Currently, about 159 Finns are active in civilian international operations – also mainly in Afghanistan (EUPOL) and Kosovo (EULEX). Furthermore, there are extensive missions in Chad, in Georgia, and in the Middle East (see map). The share of civilian overseas operations is to be increased in the future.

The Finnish government considers its participation in global crisis operations to be not just a contribution to international burden-sharing, but – quite in line with its own interests – also a contribution to national security. It regards this participation as an important instrument of transformation that ensures interoperability, enhances expertise, and generates positive cost effects, thus enhancing the nation's defensive capability. Finland's participation in global operations harkens back to the early days of international peace support efforts during the Cold War. Since the first UN mission in 1956, Finnish contingents have been involved in nearly all of the UN's peace missions. Altogether, around 40,000 Finns have served overseas.

The EU: A Key Security Actor

Finland's EU accession in 1995 was motivated by economic as well as security-

Finland's participation in international crisis management



policy considerations. On the one hand, after the loss of the Soviet market, Finland experienced its worst recession since the 1930s. On the other hand, however, the perception of external risks and threats, or "fear factor", played a significant role. The immediate security effects of membership were complemented by the idea of a comprehensive stability policy. One of Finland's first EU initiatives was therefore the "Northern Dimension" (1998–2006), conceived in analogy to the cooperative efforts in the Mediterranean region. Its goal was a deepening of cooperation among the Baltic littoral countries as well as a reorganisation of relations with Russia.

Finland was quick to devote special attention to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). The fact that the decision to establish the European crisis response forces in 1999 was made in Helsinki should be regarded as symbolic: Finland was always interested in strengthening military cooperation within the EU, which it considered to be a significant security actor, while explicitly maintaining the prerogative of its non-aligned status. For instance, Finland participates in the EU battlegroups and contributed contingents to them in 2007/8. Another Finnish participation is scheduled for 2011. This engagement is justified by pointing out the improvement of both the EU's and Finland's crisis management capabilities.

Due to similarities in challenges and the increasing strategic importance of Northern Europe, cooperation in the framework of the Nordic countries, in particular with Sweden and Norway, has recently increased. Since December 2009, the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO) has been aiming to coordinate procurement, training, manoeuvres, and research. Furthermore, these countries cooperate in elaborating a strategy for the Baltic Sea region, which includes Russia and the Baltic states.

Close Cooperation with NATO

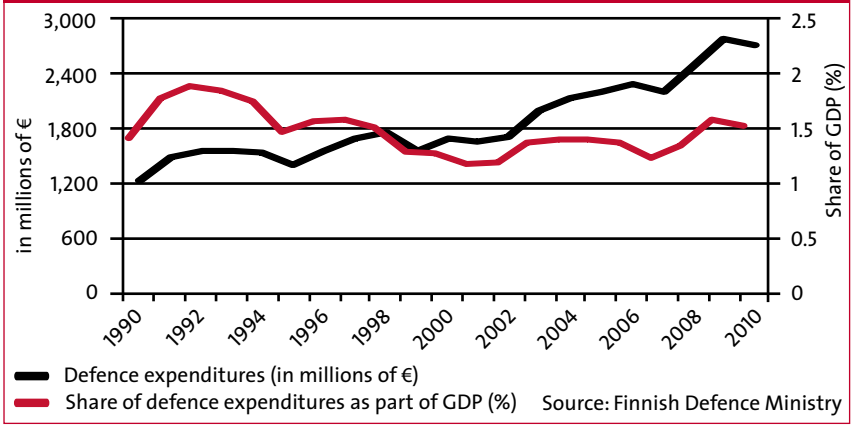
In the framework of Partnership for Peace, Finland has significantly increased its convergence with NATO. Helsinki's military capabilities are developed in line with NATO standards, and the country participates actively and occasionally takes the lead both in alliance manoeuvres and in NATO missions, and has since 2008 been contributing logistic support to the NATO Response Force. Observers regard this as a political commitment to de-facto membership in the North Atlantic Treaty. Indeed, government circles have been considering NATO membership for some time. According to some predictions, this might become a crucial issue in the context of the Finnish parliamentary elections in spring of 2011. If the conservatives (Kokoomus), led by Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb and Defence Minister Jyri Häkämies, should remain in government after 2011, and if the Centre (Keskusta) or Social Democratic (SDP) parties should support this effort, it is quite possible that Finland will launch an official bid for membership in a few years' time. Advocates of accession often argue that it would entail savings and other financial benefits. In addition to the expected synergies and joint procurement, they emphasize the exchange of intelligence and the security guarantee under Article V of the North Atlantic Treaty.

Large parts of the population view the idea of NATO membership with scepticism, however. The heritage of the carefully circumspect "Paasikivi-Kekkonen Line" pursued during the age of the East-West conflict continues to enjoy deep-rooted support in Finland. It is often emphasised that the Finnish public predominantly endorses a traditional conception of defence and military capabilities. Also, the term "alliance" does not go down well among the general population. The relations with the Soviet Union, as governed by the treaty between the two countries (1948–91), were difficult, and collaboration with Nazi Germany (1941–44) remains a difficult chapter in Finnish history.

Even as a non-member, Helsinki contributes significantly to NATO-led missions. Finland's current engagement as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan amounts to approximately 121 soldiers. The number of troops was almost doubled temporarily ahead of the elections in August 2009. The Finnish contingent in the Swedish-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Mazar-e-Sharif is actively engaged in the ISAF Regional Command North, under German command. Also, Finnish experts take part in training the Afghan National Army. In January 2010, Finnish President Tarja Halonen and the cabinet committee on foreign and security policy decided to raise the number of troops again by 50 soldiers until early 2011, with a view to reassessing Finland's engagement at the end of that year.

In 2009, the most controversial domestic debate so far was held over the mission in the Hindu Kush. Public criticism was raised to the effect that Finland had become a warring party. Indeed, Finnish soldiers were increasingly engaging in combat operations. With a few exceptions, the political elites continued to emphasise the peacekeeping character of the mission and its focus on reconstruction. Discussions among the Finnish public have so far remained an intermittent phenomenon. This is partially due to the fact that the Finnish parliament – unlike the Swedish assembly, for instance – does not have to approve the Afghan mission on a yearly basis. Finnish government circles apparently continue to extend pragmatic support to the emerging change in international crisis operations from traditional UN peacekeeping efforts to so-called "robust missions".

Development of Finnish defence expenditures, 1990–2010



Source: Finnish Defence Ministry

Traditional conception of defence

In parallel with its engagement in international crisis management, however, Finland continues to uphold a traditional conception of security. This notion is based on territorial defence, general conscription, and a large pool of reservists. Its peripheral geostrategic position and the experience of being attacked and involved in the battles of World War II continue to shape the country's perceptions. The effects of the Winter War (1939/40) and the so-called Continuation War (1941–44) can be seen in Finland's foreign and security policy even today, for example in the emphasis on what is often termed a "realist" conduct of its foreign affairs and relations with Russia.

At the same time, the experience of World War II – although Finland suffered a serious military defeat, high casualties, and the loss of its Karelian region, it avoided Soviet occupation – laid the groundwork for a continuing reliance on autonomous territorial defence, which still dominates prioritisation regarding personnel and resource allocation. Expenditures on armaments account for one third and personnel costs account for one quarter of defence expenditures. By comparison, costs for international operations amount to a relatively modest 2 per cent (it should be noted that personnel costs for Finland's crisis management operations are covered by the Foreign Ministry). The country's defence expenditures have tended to increase since the mid-1990s; today, the defence budget is about 1.5 per cent of GDP (cf. Table 1).

In the 2009 White Paper, "credible" comprehensive national defence is still the basic and predominant concern. In order to adapt this goal to the state of modern-day security policy and financial affairs, the Finnish armed forces are currently undergoing a structural modernisation. General conscription will be retained, with all male Finns between the ages of 18 and 50 liable to military service. Basic functional service lasts between 180 and 362 days. Subsequently, soldiers must serve another 40 to 100 days before being transferred to the reserves. Altogether, the service branches of the army, navy, and air force have a peacetime active personnel strength of 30,000 and a reserve force of 237,000. The total mobilisation force has been reduced from 520,000 to 350,000 troops, and another downsizing by 100,000 troops is planned in the medium term. The Defence Command as the supreme headquarters in Helsinki plans and coordinates joint operations of the Defence Forces. Since the number of Finns in military service has recently declined to about 80 per cent of eligible conscripts, the authorities are seeking ways to enhance the attractiveness of military service relative to the alternative civilian service.

The main emphasis of the armed forces is on the ground troops, due to the size of the country and its overall defence strategy. The army is regionally divided into four operational military commands (Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western). The navy fleet is geared towards the requirements of Finland's Archipelago Sea; the air force of 160 aircraft is the only service branch to operate at full readiness size even in peacetime.

The Role of Russia

Russia remains the main security policy challenge in Finland's environment. Finland and its mighty neighbour share a 1,300-km border as well as an ambivalent history. Furthermore, the Russian Kola Peninsula north of Finland is home to a nuclear base of great strategic importance. Traditionally, Finland has defined itself as a "frontier" between East and West, and even today, many of Helsinki's foreign- and security-policy aims and interests are directly attributable to the country's position on the border between the EU and Russia.

Fears concerning a neighbour perceived as unpredictable were among the reasons for Finland's EU accession. The debate over possible NATO membership is also influenced by developments in Russia. Large parts of Finnish society regarded the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 as a new warning signal of a potential danger emanating from Russia. However, since World War II, Helsinki has always striven to avoid conflicts with Moscow. If Finland should join the Atlantic Alliance, maritime access to St Petersburg would be bordered by NATO members Finland and Estonia. This is only one of the reasons why Moscow is opposed to the notion of Finland's alliance membership. In general, however, it should be noted that the Russian-Finnish relationship today is primarily shaped by the overarching relations between the EU and Russia.

Squaring the Circle?

Security policy cooperation and participation in international crisis management are closely linked in Finland's self-perception with national territorial defence. On the one hand, this paves the way for promising use of synergies. On the other hand, the coexistence of traditional conceptions of defence policy with new security-policy strategies and options is not free from tensions. The chosen path seems viable, however, especially since the defence sector has undergone a profound structural overhaul in recent years. Despite all adaptations in favour of institutional cooperation with the EU and NATO, military non-alignment remains, at least for the time being, the decisive precept and the instrument that allows the country to maintain its balancing act between cooperation in security-policy matters and autonomous defence, and thus also serves as a compromise formula that helps to alleviate domestic disagreements.

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