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Securing Finland: The Finnish Defence Forces are again focused on high readiness

Finland has adjusted its comprehensive national security planning, and returned the Finnish Defence Forces to higher readiness levels. Increased readiness raises the threshold for an opponent to achieve its goals using military force. The driver for this is the military capability exhibited by Russia.

In response to the changed security environment in Europe, the Finnish authorities have during the past three years methodically increased Finland's readiness to respond in the event of a military conflict. The adjustments relate to changes and clarifications in legal frameworks, increased training and exercise levels, as well as higher budgets, and have improved the speed, volume and capability of the military to respond.

Finland's history and geography meant that while much of Europe had dispensed with national defence planning in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, Finland steadfastly retained its comprehensive national defence system. While readiness was reduced, the system was not only maintained but modernized.

The modernized comprehensive societal security approach is one of the cornerstones that makes Finland more resilient to multi-pronged ('hybrid') attempts to limit its sovereignty; others comprise an essentially strong, fair and stable society, and an extensive web of international cooperation. As part of the comprehensive security approach, private, public and third-sector actors in Finland meet frequently to update plans and to practise how the 'critical functions of society' will be maintained even during deep national crises. Underwriting this is

a national defence system (not just national defence forces) based on extensive reserves, a part of which has access to high-end materiel.

The most significant weakness in the system has been the ability to respond quickly to military attacks that fall below the threshold of a conventional and clear military invasion. Efforts to remedy this are ongoing, with some success. As recently as early 2014, if Finland had needed to respond quickly to a military threat on the ground, for a ready formed unit the government would have been able to call on a few platoon-sized element of Special Forces soldiers. In 2017, thousands of soldiers across the country could be equipped and performing their primary tasks within hours.

Due to the requirement to enforce territorial integrity on a 24/7 basis, the Finnish Navy and Air Force already had better readiness levels, but these have also been improved, and tested in the real world. At least one navy ship is continually patrolling or on instant stand-by, with another ready to leave port in hours. The recently upgraded F-18 Hornets are now among the most capable fighter jets in the region, and a few are always armed and ready to take off.

For the Army, which until recently was fundamentally a training organization, the newly established

'readiness forces' will further bolster readiness, enabling a more immediate dispersal of assets and in extremis local counter-attacks. The 'tip of the spear' – the paramilitary Border Guard forces that reside within the Ministry of Interior but which are integral to national defence planning – have also publicly noted an increase in readiness.

These changes reflect the reality that the strategic warning in advance of a potential attack is now measured in a few weeks, at most. While previously the planning assumption was that there would be months to prepare for armed conflict, allowing time to train forces and procure any necessary additional materiel, the current thinking in the Finnish Defence Forces can be summed up in the phrase: "If we don't have it in our hands now, it doesn't exist". This is a significant change of mindset compared to just a few years ago.

Increased readiness is buttressed by increases in the Interior Ministry and defence budgets for 2018, of around €98 million. Around €50 million is for increased military readiness, while smaller amounts go to the police and Border Guard. When the upcoming acquisition of new coastal corvettes and fighter jets is included, this means that – calculated according to NATO standards – Finland will allocate in excess of 2% of GDP to defence.

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Legislative changes have also played a role in Finland's increasing ability to respond flexibly to military challenges. For example, the military can now protect its own convoys during peacetime; previously the police had, in effect, been the authority responsible for protecting convoys. Another legislative change is that reservists can now be called to refresher training with immediate effect, while previously a three-month notice period was legally required. This allows Finland to heighten readiness significantly and flexibly, without the enactment of emergency laws.

Despite the above changes, vulnerabilities still exist. These include a lack of defensive depth (Finland lives within the Russian Anti-access Area Denial bubble), limited stores of high-end materiel, and too infrequent reservist exercises. Still, around fifty thousand conscripts and reservists go through training each year.

Another vulnerability relates to Finnish authorities adapting to the demands of the information age. Adaptation requires, among other things, new legal frameworks, and adjusting to the reality that individuals with the skills to make key contributions to national defence and societal security frequently work

outside of official corridors. Once legal, practical, and organizational culture issues are resolved, Finland has the potential to develop serious cyber and information operations capabilities. Perhaps this is an opportunity to learn from partners such as Sweden, the United States, the United Kingdom and Estonia?

Finland's actions during the past few years have raised the threshold for an opponent to successfully use military force against the country. Indirectly, this also contributes to regional stability by increasing the potential costs of military adventurism in the region as a whole.