



Closing Ranks: Finland and Nordic Cooperation

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Finland aims to ensure that the N5, the group of Nordic countries, will form the most integrated region in the world by 2030. This is part of Finland's foreign and security policy response to the changing operating environment involving global challenges, problems with EU cohesion on basic issues, and the deteriorated security situation in the immediate vicinity of the country. To achieve this goal, Finland will use Nordic cooperation platforms, including the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCM), the work of which the country coordinates in 2021.

Far-reaching Integration. The goal of deeper cooperation of the N5 (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) was included in the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy published in October 2020, which sets the direction of this policy for the current term (the document is waiting for approval by parliament). Such an intention was also included in the action plan for 2021-2024 of the NCM, the official body responsible for intergovernmental cooperation between the Nordic countries. Institutionalised Nordic cooperation, which started with the establishment of the interparliamentary Nordic Council, is almost 70 years old, but in some areas such as social policy it has an even longer past. It has contributed to the creation of the Nordic welfare model as a brand and a set of social policy institutions and standards. It also has facilitated the unification of environmental and climate policies in the N5. The objective to create the most integrated, socially and environmentally sustainable region in the world is therefore realistic and based on previous cooperation.

The action plan under Finland's presidency of the NCM is consistent with the goals of Sanna Marin's coalition government, composed of five left-wing and centrist parties. The country considers the multifaceted deepening of close ties with Sweden and within the N5 as one of the most important tools to increase security, along with strengthening the EU's cohesion and partnership with NATO, of which Finland is not a member. The Marin government, however, notes shortcomings in EU cohesion, for example, in the implementation of EU policies and

compliance with common values, including a lack of adherence to the rule of law by Member States, which, according to Finland, has had a negative impact on the Union's global influence. Therefore, in the face of the pandemic, environmental challenges, and uncertainties connected to cooperation within the rules-based international system, Finland wants to develop relations with partners in its immediate vicinity with whom the country shares common values and similar societal institutions.

The Finnish presidency wants to ensure the integration of Nordic societies and a green transformation leading to economic growth. The aim is to increase the mobility of the inhabitants of the N5 by eliminating all administrative barriers (including social security benefits or recognition of qualifications) to relocate, work, or run a business. Having learned from the experience of limited Nordic cooperation in combating the pandemic, Finland would like the N5 to retain the freedom of movement in the border regions and economic zones, even in times of a health crises and, at the same time, to increase the willingness to jointly manage them, for example, by securing mutual access to medical products and healthcare. To this end, the N5 states are to increase cooperation in the area of digitalisation, create common databases, and prepare a unified electronic identification system. There are also plans to build an integrated 5G region.

As part of its environmental actions, Finland will focus on the goal of carbon neutrality of Nordic economies, in particular the promotion of a circular economy in the

construction industry, which uses about half of all natural resources. It also wants to strengthen environmental and climate diplomacy to more effectively promote the N5 as global leaders in achieving climate goals and increase their influence on, for example, the upcoming negotiations on the climate goals of the Paris Agreement. Finland also intends to deepen the N5 partnership with the Baltic States (B3), especially in the area of data exchange and access to digital services.

Security Cooperation. According to the Finnish government, the security situation in Northern Europe is unstable and its development is difficult to predict. Finland does not consider that the country is under the threat of a direct military attack, however, it recognises the necessity to strengthen its defence capabilities. Finland has been gradually strengthening its defence cooperation with NATO, and in recent years also with the U.S. and its Nordic neighbours, especially with Sweden. The country's less important partners in ensuring the security of the Baltic Sea region are the B3 (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), with whom it wants to maintain bilateral and multilateral cooperation.

A new element in the regional dimension of Finnish security policy is the perception of the increasing interdependence of the situation in the Baltic Sea, the North Atlantic, and Arctic regions. This has been highlighted in both the new government report and the trilateral statement of intent to enhance military cooperation between Finland, Sweden, and Norway, signed in September 2020. Enhanced cooperation with Norway proves the growing importance of the Arctic in Finnish security policy. The reasons for this are, on the one hand, [Russia's](#) increasing military presence and the strengthening [U.S.](#) bilateral defence cooperation with NATO's Nordic allies (Norway, Denmark, Iceland) in this area. On the other hand, many other entities are trying to secure their economic and political interests in the far north, including [China](#), the UK, and the EU. The Nordic states are also updating their Arctic strategies. Their decades-long cooperation in this area has so far focused on environmental protection and the living conditions of the people living in the areas above the Arctic Circle. Despite the growing importance of the defence dimension of this cooperation, in Finland's view, the real existential threat in the Arctic is climate change, the seriousness of which should not be obscured by state rivalries.

The ambition resulting from last year's statement on Finnish-Norwegian-Swedish defence cooperation is also to

conduct coordinated operations in times of crisis and conflict and to coordinate joint operation plans. The trilateral format is intended to support Nordic defence cooperation (NORDEFECO), which pursues similar objectives complemented by increasing interoperability and efficiency of N5 spending on defence. Finland, which will chair NORDEFECO this year, will focus on, among other issues, cooperation in the field of security of supply and total defence.

Conclusions. In response to global challenges, internal EU disputes, and growing concerns about its security, Finland is deepening its collaboration with like-minded countries in its neighbourhood. This does not mean turning away from multilateral or EU cooperation—Finland still recognises these tools as the most effective for solving global problems, and therefore wants to get involved, for example, in UN reform and improving EU cohesion. The pragmatic strengthening of the already close Nordic ties is to increase the state's influence in international relations. The N5 format is also a unique example of state integration in the world, and in some areas deeper than assumed by the EU integration model.

The focus of Finland's regional defence cooperation is gradually shifting from the Baltic Sea region to the north. Nevertheless, the country's policy towards this region will not change fundamentally. Since Finland assumes that if a conflict occurs it would take place with the greatest probability in the Baltic region, it will not neglect its cooperation with the B3 and Poland in the area of defence and security policy (for example, joint exercises), as this could negatively affect its relations with NATO and the B3's sense of security. However, the deepening of Finnish involvement in bilateral cooperation with Poland may be difficult due to the critical assessment of Poland's disputes over the rule of law, the political importance of which for Finland is fundamental. It is in Poland's interest to maintain the widest possible range of bilateral and multilateral cooperation channels with the Nordic partner, for example, by joining B3 activities, with which Finland wants to develop cooperation also in the field of digitalisation. Despite the differences, a similar perception of the threat posed by Russia and the desire to maintain the closest possible transatlantic relations make Finland and other Nordic states closer to Poland in this respect than other partners, for example, from the Visegrad Group.