



## Finland Foreign Policy: Adjusting to (Not So) New Priorities

Veronika Jóźwiak

The war in Ukraine has led to a significant change in Finland's long-standing Russia policy and triggered the landmark decision to apply for membership in NATO. At the same time, in response to the Russian aggression, Finland continues to build on existing processes of strengthening relations with the U.S. and Nordic partners and aiming to increase the EU's effectiveness as an international actor. Convergence with Poland on the perception of threats, policy towards Russia and Ukraine, as well as common interests related to security, make Finland a natural and desired partner, not only in NATO but also in the EU.

**Policy Towards Russia and Ukraine.** After the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, there was a radical change in the Finnish approach to Russia. The war broke down one of the pillars of Finnish security policy, namely that relations with Russia should be based on cooperation and dialogue. President Sauli Niinistö and Prime Minister Sanna Marin claim that since Russia has broken international law and destroyed the European security system, it is impossible to return to the old paradigm of relations, even after the war, which, for Finland, has only one acceptable outcome—Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine. According to Finnish decision-makers, this is a condition for shaping future bilateral relations.

Changes took place also at the level of social contacts. In the last decade, local border traffic at selected points on the 1,340 km-long Russian-Finnish border and cross-border cooperation have become the norm. Therefore, the Finnish government's decision from 30 September to limit the entry of Russian citizens into the country was significant. It was made following Russia's announcement of partial mobilisation and, as a result, an increase in the number of border crossings from that country. The Finnish border guard also reported that it needed to build a fence on a 130-260 km section of the border to prevent potential forced, uncontrolled migration flows, which Russia tried on the border with Finland in 2015. The Finnish government has already obtained the support of the parliament for building this barrier, the first section of which is to be built by the summer of 2023.

There are also elements of continuity in the approach to Russia. Finland has viewed it as a threat for several decades and has prepared to defend its territory against it. The country has kept a general conscription model and gradually increased its self-defence capabilities. In addition, its defence system is also based on total defence—a concept covering, among others, strengthening the society and economy's resilience to threats and the security of critical infrastructure. As part of it, for example, the government wants to tighten controls over real estate purchases by non-EU nationals.

Since 2014, Finland has been an advocate of imposing and maintaining EU sanctions on Russia. Currently, the country is a fierce supporter of further restrictions and a complete cut off from Russian gas and oil by the EU, compensated by heavy investments in the green transition. The share of natural gas in the energy mix of Finland is 6% and oil is 21%. In May, Russia stopped supplying Finland with gas, while the volume of Russian oil purchases, which had covered most of the Finnish demand, decreased by around 70% already in March, replaced mostly with imports from Norway.

Despite the sudden changes that the new security environment has required of the government, its policies align with the society's attitudes. According to October polls, around 90% of Finns believe that Finland cannot normalise relations with Russia while Vladimir Putin is in control. Most of them also suppose that the only way to end the war is Russia's withdrawal from Ukrainian territory and that

Ukraine should be supported more intensively with heavy weaponry.

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion, Finland has continuously provided Ukraine with political, financial, and material support. It also declares further assistance according to Ukraine's needs. Finnish authorities delivered the ninth package of military aid in October and are already preparing the next one. Details of the granted military aid are not disclosed to the public; however, media estimates are that its value at the end of September amounted to more than €90 million worth (around 0.8% of Finland's defence budget, which is the lowest figure among the Nordic countries). The Ukrainian Armed Forces use, for example, armoured personnel carriers and anti-aircraft guns of Finnish production. Finnish military personnel have also participated in the training of Ukrainian soldiers in the United Kingdom.

**Further Deepening of Partnerships.** NATO membership—already ratified, with the exception of Hungary and Turkey, by all members of the Alliance—will bring Finland even closer to its large partners with an increased interest in security in the Baltic because of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. A Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the U.S. will serve the deepening of bilateral relations, although negotiations of it have not begun. Finland also plans to tighten this type of cooperation with the United Kingdom, with which it signed a security agreement in May, and with Canada, especially in the Arctic.

Finland, traditionally interested in developing the EU's defence competences, continues to see membership as the second pillar of its security. It has an even greater interest in both complementary EU-NATO cooperation and in increasing the EU's effectiveness in the field of external action. Therefore, the country favours introducing qualified-majority voting in some of these matters (including the adoption of sanctions). This goal results from Finland's principled approach to values as the basis of common interests and the belief that the EU's dependence on authoritarian states (including in energy and technology), also on China, should be reduced at all costs as this will increase EU security.

The accession of Finland (and Sweden) to NATO will result in even greater cohesion of the Nordic states, so far divided by the lack of membership of these two countries in the Alliance. Although the Finnish authorities emphasise that they do not want to create a separate Nordic bloc in the Alliance, they admit that due to the high degree of interdependence of these countries, the adoption of common commitments and functioning in the same structures will significantly increase their ability to cooperate

for the benefit of the entire Alliance. Evidence of it is the recent intensification of military exercises with NATO partners and Sweden, which have been held regularly for years. In the face of the problems in the energy sector caused by Russia and the experiences of the pandemic, the Nordic countries want to undertake joint efforts to strengthen the security of supply and accelerate the region's green transition.

Despite the change in Sweden to the centre-right government of Ulf Kristersson, which took power in October, that country and Finland remain the closest partners for each other, as confirmed by the prime ministers and defence ministers of both countries. They are determined to join NATO together at the same time, even if Turkey refuses to ratify the application of one of them. They also want to cooperate even more closely apart from defence, including in the field of security of supply and combating hybrid threats. Finland also envisages deeper cooperation with Estonia in many areas, including digitisation and the green transformation. These are lasting partnerships that will not be affected by the outcome of the Finnish parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2023.

**Conclusions for Poland.** Finland's membership in NATO opens up new opportunities for Poland for closer cooperation in defence and security policy. Poland's deepened involvement in Nordic (and Nordic-Baltic) cooperation would be natural because of the common interest in strengthening security in the Baltic sea basin. It would also mean increased activity among the countries with which it shares a common perception of threats, the Russian aggression, and consistency in supporting Ukraine.

Finland recognises and appreciates Poland's enormous contribution to helping Ukraine and building EU consensus around community actions in its favour, as highlighted by Prime Minister Marin. She also admits that the suppositions of Poland and the Baltic states related to Russia's policy in recent decades have been more accurate than the Finnish choices in this regard. It is therefore the right time for Poland to capitalise on this role, also in the Nordic dimension of its foreign policy.

Creating a counterbalance to the Franco-German tandem in European politics, especially in the field of EU external actions, something the Polish government has been aiming at for years, could become a reality by building a coalition with Nordic and Baltic partners and some Central European countries (without Hungary, whose policies towards Russia, Ukraine, and China make it impossible to cooperate with it). However, the ongoing disputes with EU institutions are an obstacle to building such broad partnerships.