

Charly Salonius-Pasternak, Senior Research Fellow, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Henri Vanhanen, Parliamentary Assistant to Member of Finnish Parliament Ilkka Kanerva; Senior Editor at The Ulkopolitist

FINLAND'S DEFENCE COOPERATION

THE 'NO A PRIORI LIMITS' APPROACH WITH SWEDEN SHOULD BE A MODEL FOR OTHER COOPERATION EFFORTS

Finland's efforts to weave a web of bi- and multilateral defence cooperation have developed faster than anticipated. Yet cooperation with Sweden is unique, partially because limits have not been set a priori on what cooperation could entail. Finland should formally adopt this 'no a priori limits' approach throughout its other defence cooperation relationships.

Finland is allied politically and economically through its European Union (EU) and Euro memberships, while choosing not to be a member of NATO. Yet it engages in far-reaching defence cooperation with its closest partners, such as the United States.

During the past three years, Finland has signed numerous bilateral statements of intent (SOI) or memoranda of understanding (MOU) to enable smoother bi- and trilateral defence cooperation. Each of these agreements creates administrative realities and provides a political backstop, giving those involved in cooperation more leeway in developing it.

Multilaterally, Finland's cooperation with NATO has expanded to cover a significantly harder 'edge', with participation in exercises that

simulate an Article 5-based defence of a NATO member country having become almost routine. The trend of deepening defence cooperation within the European Union (especially PESCO) has also seen Finland take a more proactive role in discussions regarding the 'meaning of' Article 42.7 for national defence preparations, as well concretely changing legislation to enable faster receipt and provision of potential military assistance.

Participation in other European defence cooperation frameworks, such as the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), France's European Intervention Initiative (EII), and the German Framework Nation Concept (FNC) approach have also contributed to strengthening the bilateral relationship between Finland and each

of the three aforementioned countries.

Nordic cooperation within the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO) framework continues to focus on taking pragmatic steps to enable closer cooperation. If implemented, the recently released NORDEFECO vision for 2025 sets goals including real-time data sharing and common situational awareness even during crisis and war; very different from the current model of sharing some information during peacetime.

The proposed minimization of restrictions on the movement of military units and storage of equipment between and through all five states, even in support of national operations and deployments, would open up the possibility of a pan-Nordic reserve-basing

framework – potentially increasing the defensive depth and resilience of the countries involved.

Yet cooperation with Sweden stands out as unique. One reason is that since 2015 it has been based on a policy of ‘without political predeterminations’. The approach, avoiding the setting of hard limits – in advance – on defence cooperation was changed between 2014 and 2015, as cooperation was initially (in 2014) limited to peacetime activities. The uniqueness is also evident on the Swedish side, where laws are being changed to remove a political constraint – enabling Sweden to legally engage in combined Finnish-Swedish territorial defence operations.

Decision-makers across the political spectrum in Finland and Sweden have come to embrace the pragmatic idea that due to the unpredictable nature of the European security environment, it would be unwise to pre-emptively limit the depth and scope of cooperation. Notable steps have been taken to reach the goal of being able to fight together (combined) in an integrated joint fashion.

For example, the Swedish-Finnish Naval Task Group (SFNTG) has entered its initial operational capability phase. On land, company-sized Finnish elements have

conducted exercises as an integral part of Swedish battalion-sized units, and this cooperation will soon extend to Finnish battalions carrying out exercises as a part of Swedish brigades.

Cooperation between the air forces of both countries has also confirmed the ability to operate as integrated combined units, able to jointly defend each other’s territory in demanding air-to-air and air-to-ground scenarios. Thus, through a range of exercises during 2017–2018 both countries have improved the threshold-raising (deterrence) function of their militaries, by publicly confirming an initial ability to fight together in a way that strengthens both Finland’s and Sweden’s national defences.

Finland would benefit from pursuing a similar strategy in other defence cooperation relationships. Other than noting that no mutual defence obligations arise due to deeper cooperation, as is done in all recently signed statements of intent or memoranda of understanding, not a priori setting limits on cooperation makes sense in the current security policy environment.

This approach does not mean accepting all suggestions a partner makes. For example, in 2017, the United States was interested in bringing B-52 bombers to Finland,

but the proposal was nixed because it was deemed not to make sense from Finnish defence or security policy perspectives.

In practice, this approach could be formalized in the next Finnish government’s programme, and subsequently in defence white papers. With appropriate phrasing, it would make Finland an even more attractive partner. It would also expand the options of decision-makers if addressing a potential future crisis required demonstrating a proven multinational capability to aid Finland and maintain peace in the region.