

# THE DEEPENING FINNISH-SWEDISH SECURITY AND DEFENCE RELATIONSHIP

FROM OPERATIVE COOPERATION TO ‘STRATEGIC INTEROPERABILITY’?

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## FROM OPERATIVE COOPERATION TO ‘STRATEGIC INTEROPERABILITY’?

- Finnish–Swedish defence cooperation has taken significant steps. Currently, the two countries engage in operative planning, which constitutes a significant part of their new cooperation agenda.
- Although interoperability between the Finnish and Swedish armed forces is crucial for the bilateral defence relationship, the countries should be ‘interoperable’ at the strategic level as well.
- Neither Finland’s and Sweden’s strategic cultures nor their decision–making systems or legislation are entirely similar. However, military non–alignment, similar threat perceptions and a shared assessment of their security environment facilitate their cooperation.
- In view of the future, questions remain about the two countries’ readiness to enter mutual defence commitments. There is also a need to ensure that their basic messages concerning the bilateral defence relationship are aligned.
- Over the longer term, the idea that one’s neighbour is worth defending should be entrenched in the strategic cultures of both states. This requires active nurturing of the already close relations between their national security communities.



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# THE DEEPENING FINNISH–SWEDISH SECURITY AND DEFENCE RELATIONSHIP

## FROM OPERATIVE COOPERATION TO ‘STRATEGIC INTEROPERABILITY’?

### INTRODUCTION

More than five years have passed since Finland and Sweden’s respective defence forces published a joint report outlining possible areas of defence cooperation between the two countries.<sup>1</sup> Underpinned by shared security concerns and interests as well as strong elite and public support, the ensuing cooperation has taken significant steps. In fact, the collaboration has progressed so well that, in 2020, the two countries’ defence forces introduced a new strategic concept that translates the existing political will into aims, directions and guidelines for the military level. Moreover, the two armed forces have drafted a new classified strategic planning directive, identifying ways to deepen the cooperation further. Apart from defence, the bilateral relationship has also deepened in terms of foreign policy more broadly.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the traditions of military non-alignment in both Finland and Sweden, the document published in 2015 was nothing short of a turning point, paving the way not only for peacetime cooperation but also for joint action in a crisis or war. At present, Finland and Sweden are developing their readiness to carry out joint operations in various situations. Their cooperation covers all three branches of the armed forces, and the countries engage in operative planning, which constitutes a significant part of their new cooperation agenda. Due to its depth and dynamism, the bilateral defence relationship has become a force to be reckoned with in Northern European security.

Previous studies on the Finnish–Swedish defence relationship have primarily focused on either the substance or the drivers of cooperation.<sup>3</sup> This Briefing Paper considers a different angle. More precisely, it examines Finnish and Swedish strategic cultures and their significance for the bilateral defence relationship. Moreover,

the paper pays special attention to the relevant legislation and the respective decision-making systems in Finland and Sweden as institutional manifestations of their strategic cultures. The aim of the paper is to evaluate what kind of implications these ‘strategic-level’ factors – strategic cultures, decision-making systems and legislation – have for the current and future bilateral defence cooperation between Finland and Sweden.

The Briefing Paper has three main parts. The first section explores Finland’s and Sweden’s strategic cultures and their peculiarities. The second part reviews the two countries’ foreign and security policy decision-making systems and relevant legislation. The third part analyses the implications of the strategic-level factors for the bilateral defence relationship. The paper concludes by suggesting some steps that the countries could take to foster ‘interoperability’ at the strategic level.

### FINLAND AND SWEDEN – SIMILAR YET DIFFERENT

Before assessing the Finnish and Swedish strategic orientations, a short conceptual note is in order. While the concept of strategic culture remains a disputed one, this Briefing Paper understands it as an umbrella term that captures the essential societal beliefs and assumptions shaping a nation’s foreign, security, and defence policy. Strategic culture entails not only fundamental views about the nature of the world – including its actors and main threats – but also views about how one should act in matters of statecraft, including the use of military force. Strategic culture is by no means the only factor shaping a state’s policy, but it is a critical element that predisposes an actor to a certain line of action.<sup>4</sup>

### Finland

Finnish strategic culture continues to be shaped by the country’s proximity to and history with Russia – in fact, Russia’s adjacency is the ultimate challenge that Finnish security policy must manage. Diplomacy – bi- and

1 Final reports on deepened defence cooperation between Finland and Sweden, [https://www.defmin.fi/files/3074/Final\\_reports\\_on\\_deepened\\_defence\\_cooperation\\_between\\_Finland\\_and\\_Sweden.pdf](https://www.defmin.fi/files/3074/Final_reports_on_deepened_defence_cooperation_between_Finland_and_Sweden.pdf).

2 Tuomas Iso-Markku (2018), “Nordic foreign and security policy cooperation: The new strategic environment as a catalyst for greater unity?”, *FIIA Briefing Paper 234*, <https://www.fia.fi/en/publication/nordic-foreign-and-security-policy-cooperation>.

3 See e.g. Charly Saloniun-Pasternak & Henri Vanhanen (2020), “Finnish–Swedish defence cooperation: What history suggests about future scenarios”, *FIIA Briefing Paper 284*, <https://www.fia.fi/en/publication/finnish-swedish-defence-cooperation>; Piotr Szymański (2019), “The northern tandem. The Swedish–Finnish defence cooperation”, *OSW Commentary March 20, 2019*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-03-20/northern-tandem-swedish-finnish-defence-cooperation>.

4 On the concept of strategic culture and its application to Finnish and Swedish security and defence policies, see Frederik Doerer (2016), “Finland, Sweden and Operation Unified Protector: The impact of strategic culture”, *Comparative Strategy* 35 (4), 284–297.

multi-lateral alike – and defence have both proved to be useful tools in terms of handling this conundrum.

Finland's historical experiences with Russia are the main reason why territorial defence has also remained at the heart of its defence policy in the post-Cold War era. While most European countries – Sweden included – decided to gear themselves towards expeditionary warfare, Finland adhered to territorial defence. Although Finland has actively participated in international crisis management operations, national defence has always held primacy in its policy, which continues to be marked by defensiveness and regional security concerns.

This underlying realist worldview is reflected in Finnish foreign policy as well. While Finland is a strong supporter of multilateralism, great-power relations play a major role in Finnish foreign policy, and nurturing relations with the big players largely falls under the remit of the president. Moreover, the circumspection mostly associated with the country's Russia policy actually colours Finnish foreign policy across the board. Helsinki is known for its pragmatism in international fora and often avoids taking vocal positions, particularly vis-à-vis great powers.

During the Cold War, Finland's policy of neutrality was primarily a way to counter-balance the close relationship with the Soviet Union. In the post-Cold War era, the practical role of military non-alignment, which replaced the policy of neutrality, has been steadily shrinking. In fact, one of the most important developments in Finland's post-Cold War foreign and security policy has been the gradually broadened interpretation as to what a militarily non-aligned state can do. This suggests that Finnish decision-makers continue to approach non-alignment rather instrumentally.

Lastly, Sweden plays a special role in Finland's security thinking. As Helsinki's room for manoeuvre has occasionally been narrow, Sweden – and Nordic cooperation at large – has historically served as a 'window to the West'. Despite Finland's close relationship with Sweden, there is some distrust towards Stockholm among Finnish policymakers, stemming from historical experiences – most notably Sweden's sudden decision to apply for membership of the European Community in October 1990.<sup>5</sup>

## Sweden

Sweden's approach to international security is characterised by a mixture of globalist idealism and realist thinking. In the global arena, Sweden has traditionally pursued a normative agenda, championing multilateralism, disarmament, human rights and the rule of law. However, in the country's immediate neighbourhood, Stockholm's approach has been based on a realist worldview, with Russia being its main threat. Apart from the heyday of the post-Cold War era, the stability of Northern Europe in general and the Baltic Sea region in particular have been key concerns for policymakers in Stockholm, even more so since the Ukraine crisis erupted. Both maintaining a sufficient defence capability and sustaining a satisfactory relationship with Russia have been central objectives for Sweden.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, the idealist and realist strands of Sweden's strategic culture have sometimes contradicted each other, exposing discrepancies between the country's foreign policy goals and its defence policy priorities. During the Cold War, Sweden often criticised the United States on the one hand, while making secret preparations for wartime cooperation with NATO members on the other.<sup>7</sup> More recently, Sweden entertained entry into the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty, although its key partners in NATO were openly against the treaty and Swedish accession.

Overall, Swedish strategic culture is rather activist. The likely roots of its activist posture lie in the period of Swedish regional preponderance as well as in social democratic internationalism. Importantly, while more prominent in foreign policy, Sweden's activism has been visible in security and defence policy as well. This is exemplified by Sweden's active participation in operations such as Unified Protector in Libya in 2011, which demonstrate Sweden's willingness and readiness to use force under certain circumstances. Furthermore, Sweden has actively communicated its defence policy posture. The Swedish solidarity declaration from 2009 can be seen as a sign of strategic proactivity, stating that 'Sweden will not remain passive if another EU Member State or Nordic country suffers a disaster or an attack'.

Another key element of Swedish strategic culture is the strong tradition of non-alignment. In fact, non-alignment has been one of the building blocks of

5 Tapio Juntunen & Matti Pesu (2018), "Mistrust within trust: Finnish-Swedish defence cooperation and the ghosts of the 1990 EC application incident". In Hiski Haukkala, Carina van de Wetering & Johanna Vuorelma (eds.), *Trust in International Relations: Rationalist, Constructivist, and Psychological Approaches*, London & New York: Routledge.

6 Magnus Petersson & Kaj Olof Kronwall (2012), *Svensk säkerhetspolitik i supermakternas skugga 1945-1991*, Stockholm: Santérus Academic Press.

7 Carl Bildt (2018), "The end of Scandinavian non-alignment", *The Strategist*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-end-of-scandinavian-non-alignment/>.



Both president Sauli Niinistö and prime minister Sanna Marin play a central role in Finnish foreign and security policy decision-making. Photo: Finnish Government

Swedish nationhood. However, during the post-Cold War era, Sweden's practical policy has increasingly been guided by the idea of solidarity rather than strict non-alignment. Like Finland, Sweden has considerably deepened defence cooperation with various partners in recent years, particularly since the eruption of the conflict in Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the idea of military non-alignment still features in the Swedish foreign policy discourse – perhaps even more so than in Finland. The governing Social Democrats in particular are keen to emphasise how military non-alignment has served – and continues to serve – the country well. Regardless of Sweden's deep cooperation with NATO and the United States, for example, the desire to preserve non-alignment manifests itself in debates about the country's NATO partnership or the EU's security and defence agenda.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, while Sweden has a notable role in Finnish strategic thinking, Finland's place in Swedish strategic considerations is less prominent. However, since its inception in the early 19th century, Sweden's non-alignment posture has had a varying 'eastern component'. This has, for example, meant that the country has avoided taking risks in its policy vis-à-vis Russia, with

Finland being part of this equation. Krister Wahlbäck has called Sweden's position towards Finland the policy of possible support, implying that Sweden's potential aid to Finland has been circumstantial.<sup>9</sup>

## DECISION-MAKING AND LEGAL ASPECTS OF COOPERATION

Assisting a country during a crisis, let alone in wartime, is a decision of the highest order. The way in which consequential decisions are made is therefore paramount. In terms of their decision-making systems, Finland and Sweden are not entirely similar, which reflects differences in their political culture and history. Moreover, there are some notable differences in their respective legislation concerning the giving or receiving of military assistance.

With regard to decision-making, the key difference is that in Finland, according to the Finnish constitution, the President of the Republic leads foreign policy in cooperation with the government, whereas in Sweden the government is responsible for the country's foreign and security policy. The presence of an additional actor, the president, has far-reaching implications for the Finnish decision-making system, where the division of competences remains subject to some controversy. The

<sup>8</sup> Saila Heinikoski (2019), "Framing of the new CSDP in military non-aligned Finland and Sweden. Promotion of national interests or a step towards a European security community?". *L'Europe en formation* 2019/2, 161-176; Magnus Christiansson (2017), "The NATO question in Sweden under the Trump presidency – Military non-alignment between power politics and feminist foreign policy". In Jaan Siitonen (ed.), *Finland, Sweden and NATO: Did Trump Change Everything?*, Brussels: The European Liberal Forum, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1170970/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Krister Wahlbäck (2011), *Jäättiläisen hengitys. Suomen-kysymys Ruotsin politiikassa 1809-2009*, Helsinki: Siltala, p. 124.

parliaments have a significant role in both states, being closely involved in defining the long-term policy line and in crisis decision-making.

As far as legislation regarding military assistance is concerned, intensifying defence cooperation has given rise to changes in both Finland and Sweden. In 2017, the provision of military assistance was added to the duties of the Finnish Defence Forces. Furthermore, in the same year, parliament enacted a law that regulates decision-making concerning the provision and reception of military assistance, including possible aid by combat forces. While primarily triggered by the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty with its mutual assistance clause and solidarity clause, the laws do not restrict Finland's actions to any particular state.

The prescribed decision-making process depends on the situation and mirrors the 'tripartite' nature of the Finnish decision-making system. In the event that the issue at hand is a significant foreign and security policy matter, the president makes the decision based on a proposal presented by the government. The law stipulates that the foreign affairs committee of the parliament must be consulted before the decision. If the matter is particularly significant, the government must give parliament a report about the situation.

In urgent matters, the defence ministry can make a decision about the provision or reception of assistance. If the matter at hand involves the use of force, the president or the government's plenary session determines the course of action. In such a case, the government is obliged to give an account to the parliament's foreign affairs committee. Moreover, the matter must be submitted to parliament immediately after the decision has been taken.

Sweden's legislation already allowed it to provide and receive military assistance. However, according to the 1974 Instrument of the Government, the government cannot deploy Swedish troops to another state without parliament's consent. Even an accelerated decision-making process to obtain the legislators' approval may last from some days to a few weeks. When it comes to the reception of forces, the Instrument gives the government more authority.

In March 2020, the Swedish government proposed a new set of laws regarding the provision and reception of military assistance in the context of the Finnish-Swedish defence cooperation, which, due to its depth, enjoys a special status among Sweden's defence partnerships. The primary aim of the new legislation is to streamline the decision-making process, duly facilitating more

effective operative cooperation between Finland and Sweden. The legislation was enacted by parliament in September 2020 and allows the government to send combat troops to Finland in order to support its neighbour in preventing territorial violations. Such support can take place without parliament's permission if Sweden is not at war and if there is no armed conflict in Finland. Parliamentary support would still be needed if Swedish troops were to help Finland counter military aggression, namely if they were to engage in military combat. In terms of receiving assistance from Finland, the government is allowed to request help and to grant Finnish troops the necessary authority in Sweden.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COOPERATION

The mere fact that Finnish-Swedish bilateral defence cooperation already covers joint operative planning and generates wartime interoperability demonstrates that the two countries' strategic cultures allow for a high degree of collaboration. The status of military non-alignment, similar threat perceptions and a shared assessment of the current nature of the security environment in Northern Europe are noteworthy factors facilitating the bilateral relationship. The subtle variation in Finnish and Swedish strategic cultures described above has not complicated the cooperation to any serious extent thus far.

Moreover, over the last half decade, officials on both sides of the Gulf of Bothnia have learnt from each other's political cultures and systems, as the bilateral relationship entails constant interaction between the two countries. Finland and Sweden have also made deliberate efforts to familiarise themselves with their respective decision-making structures and processes. Tabletop exercises simulating crisis decision-making were part of the 2015 agenda, and have been conducted between government officials. Furthermore, in November 2019, a tabletop exercise – based on a scenario envisioning a conflict in the Baltic Sea region – was carried out at the ministerial level between the Finnish and Swedish defence ministers, Antti Kaikkonen and Peter Hultqvist.

As to the future of Finnish-Swedish defence cooperation, there are some issues related to strategic culture and decision-making that are worth addressing. The first is the question of commitment. Both countries have their own non-alignment traditions, which have made them wary of making formal mutual defence commitments. However, the Finnish tradition is somewhat

more instrumental and flexible. Although NATO membership remains out of the question for the time being, Finnish policymakers have been enthusiastic supporters of the Lisbon Treaty's mutual assistance clause, Article 42.7. Moreover, based on comments made by some policymakers, Finns seem more willing to consider a formal defence pact with Sweden in the future. Given its more vulnerable geographical position, Finland would also be a more likely recipient of military aid.

In Sweden, the non-alignment tradition is stronger despite the country's proactive strategic communication. Moreover, it is coupled with risk-aversion when it comes to taking responsibilities in the east. This is a critical factor in the somewhat asymmetric Finnish-Swedish relationship. As pointed out by the renowned former Swedish diplomat Tomas Bertelman: 'For Finland, cooperation with Sweden in some sense represents a step westward. For Sweden in the same sense it represents a step eastward.' In other words, whereas the westward step provides a security benefit for Finland, the step eastwards could expose Sweden to additional risks. This view was echoed by another Swedish diplomat, Krister Bringéus, in his report about Swedish security and defence cooperation.<sup>10</sup> Hence, owing to its strategic culture and to simple geographical facts, the current deep but ultimately non-committal cooperation may well serve Swedish interests also in the future.

A further interesting question is whether Sweden will extend its new legislation on military assistance, thus far applying only to Finland, to other key partners as well. Such legislation would admittedly better reflect the reality, widely acknowledged in Sweden, that the defence of Northern Europe requires cooperation with several actors. The intention in Sweden may be to enact new laws in a piecemeal fashion. Given the two countries' non-alignment tradition, Finland was a low-hanging fruit to begin with, possibly paving the way for an extension in the future. More extensive legislation would be in Finnish interests.

Finally, owing to the nuances in their strategic cultures, Finland and Sweden tend to communicate about their defence policies, including their bilateral cooperation, in different ways. Sweden's communication strategy is oftentimes more direct, open and proactive, whereas Finland is more prone to keeping things under wraps. Considering that political signalling to third

parties is a key part of defence cooperation, Helsinki and Stockholm would do well to make sure that their basic messages concerning the bilateral defence relationship are aligned, even if they adhere to their own style of communication.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE STEPS

As long as the current geostrategic realities in Northern Europe prevail, Finland and Sweden's defence cooperation is likely to take novel steps and cover new territory. The Finnish and Swedish defence forces will be increasingly interoperable in various crisis and conflict scenarios, which should raise the threshold for any aggression towards either country. Against this background, it is all the more important for the Nordic duo to remain 'interoperable' at the strategic level. In other words, should a crisis or a military conflict erupt, Finnish and Swedish politicians must be ready to make coordinated, swift and weighty decisions. Perhaps most importantly, the idea that one's neighbour is worth defending should be entrenched in the strategic cultures of both states.

In terms of concrete future steps, exercises simulating crisis decision-making should remain a critical feature of the bilateral agenda, including rehearsals at the ministerial level. National decision-making exercises simulating requests for international assistance are equally important, and should include all relevant actors. In Sweden, for example, parliament carried out a decision-making exercise in March 2020 as a part of a broader total defence rehearsal.<sup>11</sup> The Finnish parliament should consider arranging a similar exercise as well. It could entail an element simulating the decision-making process regarding the provision of military assistance. This would serve to raise the decision-makers' and public's awareness of the actual depth of Finnish-Swedish defence cooperation.

Finally, nurturing the already close relationships between Finnish and Swedish politicians, officials, and the broader national security communities is imperative if the states want to increase mutual understanding of their security interests. Although the strategic cultures of Finland and Sweden are rooted in their – partly shared – historical experiences and are resistant to change, intentional and ever deeper interaction could knit the countries even closer together. /

10 Tomas Bertelman (2015), "Coming into Alignment", *The American Interest*, October 5, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/05/coming-into-alignment/>; Krister Bringéus (2016), *Säkerhet i ny tid*, Stockholm: Statens offentliga utredningar. pp. 77–78, [https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/dc054ef38cde47dabf5aadf63dcab469/sou-2016\\_57.pdf](https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/dc054ef38cde47dabf5aadf63dcab469/sou-2016_57.pdf).

11 "Riksdagen genomförde sin första totalförsvarsövning någonsin", <https://www.fhs.se/arkiv/nyheter/2020-03-06-riksdagen-genomforde-sin-forsta-total-forsvarsovning-nagonsin.html>.