

GOVERNMENT REPORTS ON FINNISH FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

RELEVANT BUT NOT WITHOUT PROBLEMS

Henri Vanhanen



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- The government reports on foreign and security policy have become a well-established and recognized practice in which the Government of Finland issues a report generally once during the parliamentary term.
- The reports can be regarded as comprehensive and strategic documents, whose purpose is to signal the strategic directions of Finland's present and future policy for both domestic and foreign readers.
- Regardless of the government reports' institutionalized role in Finnish foreign and security policy practices, they are not without problems. The main issue with the current report process is linked to the quickly changing operational environment. Thus, a more frequent process such as an annual announcement on foreign and security policy to support the government reports should be considered.
- It is relevant to ask whether the current tradition of producing reports is the most effective way to outline or signal Finland's overall foreign and security policy. In order to address the issues of the reporting process, alternative methods to support and evaluate Finland's foreign and security policy should be considered.



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INTRODUCTION

In autumn 2019, the Finnish government announced that it was drafting a new report on foreign and security policy. The drafting process began in spring 2020 and the report was originally expected to be published in summer 2020. Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the publication was postponed until autumn 2020.

Traditionally, the reports have covered all aspects of Finnish foreign, security and defence policy. This practice changed in 2016, however, when the government decided to draft two separate reports – one on foreign and security policy and the other on defence policy. The two reports share the same basis for policymaking, but have a different emphasis.

The first Finnish government report on foreign and security policy was published in 1995 and the process has continued since then, usually once during the electoral term. The report published this year is the eighth of its kind. The reports provide a general overview of Finland's worldview and the way in which foreign, security and defence policy choices are being conducted. They also represent a longer continuum in Finnish foreign policymaking since the end of the Cold War.

This Briefing Paper outlines the role of the government foreign, security and defence policy reports in Finnish foreign policy decision-making. The paper outlines how the government reports are a well-established process and an elemental part of Finnish foreign policymaking. However, the report process is not without problems as the rapidly changing environment creates challenges for foreign and security policy analysis. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has served to highlight this problem. Hence, a more frequent process such as an annual announcement on foreign policy to support the government reports should be considered.

THE GOVERNMENT REPORTS – A WELL-ESTABLISHED PROCESS

During the Cold War, Finnish foreign, security and defence policy was formulated under the leadership of the President of Finland, and neither foreign affairs nor security policy-related threat perceptions were openly discussed in Finnish society. Instead, these topics were handled behind closed doors in the President's Office or relevant ministries. The reports by the Parliamentary Defence Committees during the 1970s and 1980s can be seen as the first attempts to increase parliamentary influence and commitment to security and defence policymaking, but these reports were not exposed to open parliamentary debate and the committees were eventually disbanded.

Hence, the habit of avoiding open security and defence policymaking was a dominant feature of Finnish security policy practices. The end of the Cold War, the expiration of the Finno-Soviet Treaty of 1948, EU membership in 1995 and the membership application process itself all served to open up the Finnish foreign policy debate. At the same time, the probability of military threats decreased, which led to a debate on wider and comprehensive security as well as emerging threats.

In the post-Cold War era, Finnish foreign, security and defence policy has become more politically inclusive and transparent. This development began in the mid-1990s with the establishment of the foreign, security and defence policy reporting procedure. Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen's government published Finland's first foreign and security policy report in 1995 and the process continued in 1997 when the report was extended to cover not only security but also defence policy. The practice of publishing reports on foreign, security and defence policy has continued ever since and subsequent reports have been published in 2001, 2004, 2009, 2012 and 2016–2017.

It was noteworthy that parliament had not been able to discuss the basic line of Finnish foreign and



Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen's (pictured on the far left) government published Finland's first foreign and security policy report in 1995. The president at the time was Martti Ahtisaari, pictured on the right in this photo taken on the day Ahtisaari was elected in 1994. Source: Kari Kankainen / Finnish Heritage Agency / Historian kuvakokoelma (CC BY 4.0)

security policy for decades until the government report tradition was created.¹ This new tradition has been characterized by parliamentary debate and committee work. Since the 2004 report, the Finnish parliament has appointed a monitoring group of parliamentarians from different parties to ensure that parliament is included during the preparatory phase of drafting the guidelines set out in the reports. It is a common practice that the ongoing drafting process and the possible differences regarding policy choices between stakeholders are not open to public discussion. Nonetheless, an open parliamentary discussion regarding the reports is expected after their submission to the Finnish parliament.²

The reports have become a well-established and recognized practice whereby the Government of Finland generally issues a report on foreign, security and defence policy once during the parliamentary term. Since 2016, the report drafting process has undergone a structural change. The report on foreign and security

policy discusses broader topics of international relations, while the report on defence mainly addresses issues regarding national defence. Previous reports covering both broader foreign and security policy as well as defence policy had drawn criticism in the past for sidelining the needs of defence and for being contradictory.³

Since 2016, instead of releasing a vast report covering a general framework for both foreign and defence policy, a practice has been adopted whereby the government has drafted two separate reports – one on foreign and security policy and the other on defence policy. Both reports share the same analysis of the surrounding political developments but emphasize a different approach.

The reports are supplemented by several other significant papers, speeches or statements on Finnish foreign and security policy. The President's speeches (for example at the annual Ambassadorial Conference), government programmes, foreign and defence ministers' speeches and statements by the Prime Minister are also important tools of foreign and security

1 For more on the background of the government report process in the 1990s see Pesu, Matti (2017), 'Koskiveneellä kohti valtavirtaa', https://www.defmin.fi/files/3776/01_17_Pesu_Koskiveneella_kohti_valtavirtaa_V2.pdf.

2 Eduskunnan ulkoasiainvaliokunta 2006, https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/Mietinto/Sivut/UaVM_9+2016.aspx.

3 Limnell, Jarno (2008), 'Toimiiko selontekomenettely?', https://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/74136/StratL4_26.pdf.

policymaking. In this sense, the government reports can be considered more comprehensive reviews of the operational environment and Finland's policy, as they lay out the framework but do not actually articulate detailed action.

A POLITICAL COMPROMISE – THE NATURE OF THE REPORTS

The government report process is a key tool in Finnish security and defence policymaking. It results in a political document that commits the government to its policies after it is presented and approved by the Finnish parliament. In order to understand the role of the reports in Finland's foreign policymaking, factors regarding the nature of the reports and the process of their preparation need to be examined more closely.⁴ Firstly, the reports can be regarded as comprehensive and strategic documents that outline the context of Finland's foreign and security policy, but do not specify detailed measures to achieve policy objectives. Their actual purpose is to communicate the strategic directions of Finland's present and future policy to both domestic and foreign readers. Finnish foreign policy debate and practices are structured around the worldview outlined in the reports, duly offering political leaders and government officials a basic reference point for foreign and security policy.

The reports can be criticized for lacking concrete and articulated measures to achieve foreign policy objectives. On the other hand, at least in the case of the reports, the purpose of such strategic policy papers is not to create detailed action plans. Moreover, in uncertain and unpredictable operating environments, it may not be strategically viable to make statements that could act as brakes for decision-making in the future.

Secondly, when assessing the content of the reports, it should be noted that they are public government documents. They do not contain classified or sensitive information. This naturally affects the way in which they are expressed, as they are aimed not only at political actors but also at ordinary citizens. This approach also allows the political leadership to interpret and apply the content more broadly and in the most appropriate way, according to the context and their varying interests.

Thirdly, it should be noted that the reports reflect

an exceptionally comprehensive process in terms of their preparation and content, whereby their usefulness in describing Finland's foreign and security policy must be evaluated in the light of the interests of various parties. The initial drafting process is conducted mainly by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence. In addition to these ministries, the process also includes the Office of the President of the Republic, the Ministry of the Interior, the Prime Minister's Office, and several experts who are also consulted in the process.

A parliamentary working group is formed in the Finnish parliament to evaluate the process and to gather information on the drafting process. After the report is published, the relevant committee – either the Foreign Affairs Committee or the Defence Committee, depending on whether the report handles foreign and security policy or defence policy – issues a parliamentary report on the final product. In this report, the committee may also express views that diverge from those in the government report.

While broad-based preparation gives the government reports political legitimacy and fosters continuation in foreign policy, this approach also advocates a culture of consensus, which may have problematic effects. The search for a compromise between the various parties in the preparatory phase can also result in an issue of established – often institutionalized – truths. In practice, this means that the reports do not always adequately address changing environments, which can be detected for example in the fairly consistent forms of expression regarding threat perceptions.⁵ Consequently, it can be challenging to infer from the reports how Finland's wider strategic views and international developments are translated into foreign and security policy practices.

As the reports represent the lowest common denominator, they also tend to blur the differing views in the Finnish foreign policy debate and foster consensus. The differences between political parties regarding foreign and security policy are not visible in the final reports and emerge instead on other platforms, such as political speeches, party programmes and statements. For example, the National Coalition Party has declared Finland's NATO membership a policy objective since 2006. However, whenever the party has either commanded a sufficient majority to appoint the prime minister or has otherwise been a part of the

4 Vanhanen, Henri (2015), 'Selonteot ulko- ja turvallisuuspoliittisessa keskustelussa', vieraskynä *The Ulkopolitist* –verkkojulkaisussa, <https://ulkopolitist.fi/2016/06/21/vieraskyna-selonteot-ulko-ja-turvallisuuspoliittisessa-keskustelussa/>.

5 For more on Finnish threat perception policy, see Linnéll, Jarno (2009), 'Suomen uhkakuvapolitiikka 2000-luvun lopussa', https://www.doria.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/74110/StratL1_29w.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

government coalition, NATO membership has never been an active policy objective. The 2012 foreign and security policy report, released by a government led by the National Coalition Party, stated that Finland would not make preparations to seek NATO membership during that electoral term (2011–2015). Hence, the official framing of Finland's NATO policy was in direct opposition to the National Coalition Party objective that was approved during its party conference.

The fourth point concerns the non-binding nature of the reports. They comprise a topical review of international developments from the Finnish point of view, and as they do not actually set out detailed measures to achieve foreign policy objectives, they are not legally binding. Former President of the Republic Tarja Halonen has previously defined the reports as "serious instructions for action for both current and future decision-makers".⁶ This is related to the principle of accountability and the question of the extent to which the guidelines in existing reports should be followed by those governments that were not in power at the time of publication.

Although governments have traditionally followed the guidelines in the reports, as per Halonen's definition, the reports do not legally bind Finland's foreign policy leadership, but rather serve as instructions for policy practices. However, the government reports are not automatically a point of reference when it comes to Finland's foreign policy. In February 2016, a critical discussion broke out due to the arrival of US fighters for the purpose of conducting exercises with the Finnish Air Force. It is noteworthy that the then Minister of Finance Alexander Stubb defended the exercise in his personal blog,⁷ referring specifically to the government programme, instead of the reports on security and defence policy, where transatlantic defence cooperation had long been outlined. The example supports the case for considering the undefined relationship between the government reports and other relevant foreign policy statements when it comes to defining Finland's foreign policy practices.

The final point of note is the political nature of the report process and how it influences the content of the reports. Regardless of the numerous stakeholders in the process, it is political by nature and the President of the Republic and the Ministerial Committee on

Foreign and Security Policy (TP-UTVA) lead the approval of the content of the reports. Despite extensive ministry preparation, the incumbent political actors have a great deal of influence over the content. Therefore, there is room for a shift in focus between the reports' policies, depending on the president and those parties in government at the time.

ALTERNATIVE METHODS TO EVALUATE FOREIGN POLICY SHOULD BE CONSIDERED

Regardless of the government reports' institutionalized role in Finnish foreign and security policy practices, they are not without their problems. In particular, the temporal dimension of the reports, and how it affects their content, warrants careful consideration. While the reports do not dictate how a government should practise its foreign and security policy, an outdated report can result in a gap between policy objectives and the actual means to achieve them. The expiration element can consequently give rise to contradictions or misinterpretations regarding Finland's foreign and security policy.

The reports have traditionally appeared every two to four years, with a risk of expiration amid rapidly developing events. For example, there was a four-year gap between the reports of 2012 and 2016, during which the war in Ukraine erupted and had a significant impact on Finland's foreign policy. At that time, the then valid report from 2012 contained significant differences in the description of the operational environment compared to the analysis in Finnish political leadership statements after 2014. The same logic applied to events such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, with both taking place right after the 2016 report came out.

The expiration risk is also evident under the current circumstances, due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, commonly known as the coronavirus. As of now, the pandemic is considered a serious threat to national economies as financial markets have plummeted and economic growth is expected to deteriorate. While the pandemic may not change the basic strategic focal points in Finland's foreign and security policy, it is not yet known what the full-scale ramifications of the pandemic will be. However, it indicates how global crises can erupt in a matter of weeks and how different threat perceptions suddenly become reality, potentially having long-term impacts on global supply chains,

⁶ Address by President of the Republic Tarja Halonen to the Association for Security Studies at the University of Turku, 5.4.2005, <https://www.presidentti.fi/halonen/public/defaultf05a-2.html>.

⁷ Alexander Stubb's blog (2016), <https://www.alexstubb.com/kumppaneiden-kanssa-kannattaa-harjoitella/>.

the free movement of people and goods, and wider engagement between states and trends in international relations as a result.⁸ While some of the Covid-19 disruption will be of a temporary nature, the crisis highlights the need for more flexible tools in foreign policy analysis as well.

In order to address the temporal and agenda-setting issues of the reporting process, alternative methods to support and evaluate Finland's foreign and security policy should be considered. It would not be the first time that the report process has come under scrutiny. Previous reports have been subject to modifications when the need has arisen: they have been shortened (the first report from 1995 contained 45 pages, the longest version from 2004 167 pages, and the most recent report from 2016 is 32 pages long); their structure has varied, as wider security topics have become an elemental part of Finland's foreign policy analysis; and in 2016, the process was divided into two separate reports – one on foreign and security policy and the other on defence policy.

Frequency of publication could be an effective option to avoid the expiration of the reports. Sweden, for example, is accustomed to issuing more frequent statements on foreign policy, whereby the Foreign Minister annually presents the Government's Statement on Foreign Policy to the Swedish Parliament, indicating the government's current foreign policy objectives and emphases. Sweden does not release separate government reports on foreign policy, using the annual announcement process instead, and drafting a separate report on defence and security policy.

The government reports on foreign and security policy are a useful instrument in Finnish foreign policy practice and while they should not be replaced, making annual foreign policy announcements would support the government report process. The annual announcement process could steer the debate on foreign and security policy more effectively towards current issues and would clarify the link between strategy and practised policy.

An annual announcement need not necessarily cover all aspects of foreign and security policy as it could focus on chosen topics, and would therefore give the political leadership an opportunity to address individual sectors of Finland's foreign policy more exclusively. As the current tradition of addressing several topics in

a single report in line with a consensus often reduces the strategic potential of the reports, addressing and realizing chosen foreign and security policy objectives in a detailed manner would provide an opportunity to develop a higher political profile on specific topics. An annual announcement would also provide an option to shorten the government reports, emphasize their strategic focus, ease the pressure from having to address immediate events in the field of foreign affairs, and lighten the heavy report drafting process (the drafting process usually takes between six and ten months).

A positive outcome could also be a more vibrant and frequent parliamentary discussion on foreign policy, extending outside the Foreign Affairs Committee and including all members of parliament. At present, parliament's Speaker's Council may decide to organize a discussion on an issue of pressing topical interest. The timing of the debate and contributions by ministers are agreed with the government in advance. This practice can also be applied to foreign and security policy, but this is rarely the case. An annual announcement would create a permanent tradition of addressing issues of foreign and security policy in parliament.

If the annual announcement model was applied in Finland, the President of the Republic and the Ministerial Committee on Foreign and Security Policy (TP-UTVA) could take the lead in preparing policies, supported by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. If necessary – and feasible – an inter-ministerial permanent secretariat tasked with preparing the announcements could be established to support the drafting process. The Parliament of Finland could then have a parliamentary discussion after the annual announcement, presented by either the prime minister or the foreign minister.

Defence policy differs from general foreign and security policy due to the long-term procurements and budget planning associated with national defence needs. If evaluated too frequently or artificially included in wider foreign policy, defence policy can be hampered by potential inconsistencies. Therefore, continuing the practice of drafting a separate report on defence policy remains justified as it better serves the needs of the defence administration. However, it is crucial that the report on defence policy shares the same political basis for situational awareness as the other relevant foreign and security policy papers and statements.

⁸ For more on this, see Aaltola, Mika (2020), 'Covid-19 – a trigger for global transformation? Political distancing, global decoupling and growing distrust in health governance', <https://www.fiia.fi/julkaisu/covid-19-a-trigger-for-global-transformation>.

CONCLUSIONS

The government reports are important documents signalling Finland's foreign, security and defence policy. The reports represent the perspective of the government and the Finnish parliament as well as several relevant institutions, and in this sense their political legitimacy in Finnish foreign policymaking is strong. The reports also serve as a point of reference for Finland's official foreign and security policy.

However, as highlighted in this Briefing Paper, the report process is not without problems. The main issue with the current report process is linked to the

changing operational environment, where policies can quickly become obsolete. The reports are ultimately a systematic vision of Finland's place in the world, and they present the general tools for achieving such a desired position. As such, they also tend to embellish past achievements and deflect criticism away from notable failures. The reports rarely innovate or offer straightforward strategic doctrines and hence are not strategies in the sense of being wholly forward-looking. It is relevant to ask, therefore, whether the current heavy four-year cycle of producing reports is the most effective way to outline or signal Finland's overall foreign and security policy. /