

STUDY

Joel Linnainmäki  
June 2025

# The Future of NATO

*Finland – Preparing for the Worst*

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# 1

## Introduction

Having fought two wars with the Soviet Union since gaining independence in 1917, Finland has always viewed Russia as its primary geopolitical conundrum and its main direction of threat. Finland's membership in NATO doubled the length of the alliance's border with Russia, since the two countries share a 1340 km border. As NATO's second-youngest member, Finland's focus since April 2023 has largely been on full integration into the alliance. Its two main priorities for the foreseeable future are to maintain US commitments to NATO and to deter Russia.

Finland is a medium-sized military power in the Alliance, with around 900,000 reservists and a wartime strength of 280,000 troops, the largest artillery in Western Europe, and a capable air force. The country is also in the process of acquiring new F-35A fighter jets and multipurpose corvettes. This procurement has temporarily pushed the defense budget above NATO's 2 percent of GDP target. The government has decided to raise defence spending to 3 % of GDP by 2029 and is ready to support an overall 5 % target for NATO (Ministry of Defence of Finland 2025; Helsingin Sanomat 2025b). Researcher Emilia Palonen from University of Helsinki notes that political debate over defence spending is changing and becoming less consensus-oriented due to the size of the changes proposed (Yle News 2025c).

As a small country facing existential security threats for most of its existence, Finnish foreign, security and defense policy has traditionally been consensus-oriented. Heated public debate over policy has generally been avoided. The consensual character of Finnish policy is also evident in the country's NATO membership process. Out of 200 members of parliament, an overwhelming majority of 184 voted for membership, with only 7 voting against. Nevertheless, debates and tensions are surfacing over nuclear deterrence, the militarization of society, and Finland's approach to the Trump administration.

The Finnish strategic community concerned with NATO and security policy is small but active. The Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) and the National Defence University are active in research and public debate, as are individual researchers and professors at the Universities of Helsinki, Tampere and Turku. However, broader research programs focused primarily on NATO are mostly lacking in the universities. The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) is located in Helsinki, and its experts participate in discussions on hybrid threats. Former ministers, generals and ambassadors also participate actively in public debates.

## 2 Threats and Responses

Due to the country's geography, historical experience and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Finnish strategic community is strongly focused on the threat posed by Russia. Other threats and risks, such as strategic dependence on China or terrorism, are discussed and receive attention, but remain marginal in comparison. As Mikkola et al. (2025) argue, "Russia has demonstrated both the capability and the willingness to pursue its strategic interests through broad-based power politics."

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, elite and public opinion in Finland was largely opposed to NATO membership. When the first public-opinion polls were conducted in the late 1990s, less than 30 percent of Finns supported membership. Things changed drastically after the Russian invasion. One week after the invasion, support for membership had risen to 53% and continued to rise in the following weeks. The shift in public opinion was followed by a corresponding shift in support for military alignment among political elites and academics. Tuomas Forsberg has called this reorientation a case of "bottom-up driven foreign policy" (Forsberg 2024). The shift was supported by framing NATO membership as a continuation of Finland's long march to the West since the fall of the Soviet Union (Kaarkoski, Häkkinen and Kilpeläinen 2024).

The shift in public and elite opinion was influenced by several factors. Russia's public demands for a sphere of interest would have limited the sovereignty of its neighbors, including Ukraine and Finland. This would have effectively ended Finland's self-proclaimed "NATO option" policy, which stated that Finland could apply for NATO membership if necessary (Forsberg 2024). According to Pesu and Iso-Markku (2024), another factor behind the shift was the dramatic weakening of Finland's security environment. Finland's security policy prior to 2022 was based on a mix of strong conventional national defense forces, a network of bi-, tri-, and unilateral defense cooperation, a working relationship with Moscow, and support for strong multilateral institutions. Russia's full-scale invasion led political elites in Finland to conclude that a close working relationship with Moscow was no longer tenable and that strong national defense forces would not be sufficient if, in a worst-case scenario, Russia decided to try to isolate Finland militarily from the rest of Europe, including by threatening to use nuclear weapons (Pesu and Iso-Markku 2024).

In other words, previous approaches to managing the Russian threat were no longer seen as adequate and in line with the acutely increased threat level posed by Russia.

This is supported by a survey conducted by Taloustutkimus, which found that the most common reasons for Finns to support NATO membership were increased security, protection from Russia, and collective defense in the alliance (Ministry of Defence of Finland 2024a).

### Russia: Long-Term Threat to Deter

For the Finnish strategic community, Russia is a long-term threat that must be deterred rather than reassured (Saari 2023). The bilateral relationship between Finland and Russia was changed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Finland's corresponding decision to apply for NATO membership. At the start of the war, President Sauli Niinistö noted that there was no longer any trust in the relationship between the two countries: "The mask has now come off and only the cold face of war is visible" (Yle News 2022). Saari and Karjalainen (2025) emphasize that Russian aggression in Ukraine is part of a continuum. Western powers did not push back hard enough when Russia violated international norms in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014, which emboldened Russia to violate them again in 2022 with new means (Saari and Karjalainen 2025).

Finland cannot be secure as long as there is a war in Ukraine and Russia does not respect the territorial integrity of its neighbors (Saari 2024). Russia seeks a hegemonic position in its region. Its aggressive policy means that even rapid changes in the security environment are possible (Finnish Defence Forces 2025). Russia's long-term goal is to create a strategic sphere of influence covering parts of the Arctic, Baltic, Black and Mediterranean Seas in its vicinity (Ministry of Defence of Finland 2024b). This means that while there is no immediate military threat to Finland, the country "must be prepared for the use or threat of military force against Finland." There are risks of escalation in the war in Ukraine, and it is unlikely that Russia will voluntarily abandon its expansionist and revanchist policies even if the war in Ukraine ends (Finnish Government 2024a).

How the war in Ukraine will end is seen as having a direct impact on Finland's security and defense. Juha Kukkola notes that Russia's decision to reestablish its Leningrad Military District in 2024 will increase its current force posture in Finland's neighborhood over time, but the realization of these plans will take time. The plans indicate that Russia has concluded that the possibility of war in this region cannot be excluded from the 2030s onward (Kukko-

la 2024). Russia is currently able to form new military units despite heavy losses in the war. If the war in Ukraine ends favorably for Russia, it will be able to free up forces in its northwestern direction (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service 2025). An inconclusive end to the war or a continuation of hostilities would mean that Russia would be forced to tie up a larger number of forces near its border with Ukraine. According to Juha Kukkola, Russia is able and willing to use “geography, economic linkages, information tools, subversion, and strategic movements of its armed forces” to create difficult strategic challenges for its adversaries below the Article 5 threshold. Kukkola argues that for small countries like Finland, countering these coercive tactics requires alliances with great powers, intelligence gathering, resilience, and a willingness to respond to Russian operations (Kukkola 2023). These will also be important issues for Finland within NATO.

Russia’s aggression is not limited to Ukraine, but includes “hostile hybrid and sabotage operations across Europe,” These operations have also targeted Finland, including through the instrumentalization of migrants on the Finnish-Russian border (Finnish Government 2024a). Russia is also targeting critical infrastructure in Finland’s neighborhood (Ministry of Defence of Finland 2024b). Henri Vanhanen (2024) argues that Finland’s and Sweden’s membership in NATO has transformed the Baltic Sea, European Arctic, and Northern Sea regions into a single strategic area for NATO. This means that Northern Europe “can no longer be perceived as a side flank of NATO, but as one of the focal points of Euro-Atlantic security,” as the region will increasingly serve as a hotspot between NATO and Russia (Vanhanen 2024).

In conclusion, Russia is seen by the general public, political elites, and scholars as the most immediate, worrisome, and long-term threat to Finland and NATO. The most important factor affecting Finland’s and its neighborhood’s security in the short term will be the outcome of the war in Ukraine and the resulting new status quo in Europe. Finland’s relationship with Russia has been permanently altered by Russia’s aggressive policy in Ukraine, its demands for a sphere of influence, the resulting lack of trust in the relationship, and Finland’s membership in NATO. For these reasons, traditional high-level diplomacy between Finnish and Russian leaders no longer functions as a channel for resolving bilateral security issues. Meanwhile, reassuring Russia will not work because of Russia’s aggressive policies. For the foreseeable future, therefore, Finnish-Russian relations will be determined primarily by Russia’s behavior and secondarily by coordination with its allies in NATO and the European Union.

Militarily, Finland seeks to build a credible deterrent against Russia by investing in national defense, promoting greater European defense spending, and working regionally with Nordic and Baltic allies to implement NATO’s regional defense plans and capability goals. For Finland, it is crucial that NATO maintains its focus on collective defense and deterrence vis-à-vis Russia. Reassurance is not seen as a viable

alternative strategy. Economically, Finland has supported cutting trade ties with Russia and both expanding existing sanctions and making them more effective. The Trump administration’s apparent willingness to reopen diplomatic and economic relations with Russia will challenge this approach and pose a problem for NATO and EU countries.

## China: Walking the Tightrope

Finland has traditionally maintained a pragmatic relationship with China, characterized by stable political relations, trade, and predictability. Communication and meetings between heads of state have played an important role in the bilateral dialogue. Finland recognized the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in January 1950 and was the first Western country to sign a trade agreement with the PRC in 1952 and 1953 (Kallio 2020). After the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, Finland was the first Western country to make a ministerial visit to the PRC (Karppanen 2022). In 2017, Finland and China signed a declaration on a “future-oriented new-type cooperative partnership,” which was renewed during President Stubb’s state visit, despite Finland’s accession to NATO and China’s increasingly close ties with Russia (Office of the President of the Republic of Finland 2024a).

In the 2020s, however, the Finnish strategic community has become increasingly aware of the risks and challenges in the relationship related to economic security, de-risking, the China-Russia strategic partnership, and Sino-US rivalry (Krisleri 2024; Kopra et al. 2023; Wigell et al. 2022). Jyrki Kallio (2020) argues that the heyday of Finland-China economic relations ended in the early 2000s and politically at the end of the 2010s. The excitement has been replaced by a balancing act in which critical dependencies must be critically assessed while at the same time upholding economic ties and necessary political relationships (Kallio 2020). Overall, researchers see increasing geopolitical and economic risks in the relationship between Europe and China. Managing these risks requires mapping critical dependencies, diversifying value chains, and friendshoring or onshoring production.

The involvement of Chinese commercial vessels in cable and pipeline disruptions in the Baltic Sea has raised serious concerns among Finnish researchers, as well as suspicions of possible Sino-Russian cooperation in hybrid operations against the West. The Russian and Chinese navies have also conducted joint military exercises in the Baltic Sea (Yle News 2024a). According to Matti Puranen (2022), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has also established influence and intelligence networks in Finland with the aim of influencing Finnish views, co-opting local elites, and monitoring local Chinese communities. So far, Finland has sought to manage these incidents and its security concerns through dialogue and cooperation with Beijing. Finland’s former president Sauli Niinistö (in office 2012–2024) even suggested that China might be needed to guarantee Russia’s commitment to a possible peace agreement in Ukraine (Helsinki Times 2025a).

The government of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo sees China as an “important trading partner” with which Finland will “maintain functioning relations.” Finland seeks to “reduce strategic dependencies on China” and urges China to increase pressure on Russia to end its war in Ukraine (Finnish Government 2023). According to the Government Report on Foreign and Security Policy, Finland’s China policy will now be “... also influenced by our memberships in the European Union and NATO” (Finnish Government 2024a).

Linnainmäki (2024) notes that Chinese activities such as cyber and other types of espionage, joint military exercises with Russia, and economic support for Russia’s war in Ukraine directly affect Euro-Atlantic security and are therefore of interest to NATO. Finland will be forced to balance its China policy within NATO between its overriding interest in keeping NATO focused on deterring Russia, American interests in its rivalry with China, the concerns of NATO’s partners in the Indo-Pacific region, and responding to China’s direct activities in Europe. NATO cannot and should not play a major role in deterring China in the Indo-Pacific, but building a credible deterrent in Europe can help maintain NATO’s legitimacy for the United States (Linnainmäki 2024).

In conclusion, Finland’s relationship with China, long based on high-level bilateral talks between heads of state, is slowly becoming multilateralized in the context of the European Union and NATO. China will remain an important trade partner, but the relationship is increasingly characterized by risks related to economic security and security policy.

## **The Southern Dimension: Solidarity but Little Action**

Finland and Sweden received a crash course in alliance politics when Turkey and Hungary delayed consent to their NATO membership. In the ensuing negotiations, Turkey sought guarantees from Finland and Sweden that they would support its positions on terrorism within the alliance, cooperate in repatriating Kurdish individuals it considered hostile, and change their policies toward Kurdish actors in Syria. The lessons of the trilateral talks on the importance of consensus building in the Alliance will not soon be forgotten. Despite recent experience, however, the Southern Dimension remains a marginal topic in Finnish NATO studies.

Expressing solidarity with allies over their threat perceptions is a fundamental requirement for successful coalition building. Consequently, the Finnish strategic community strongly supports NATO’s 360-degree approach to deterrence and defense, which covers all threats to the Alliance from all directions. According to Linnainmäki (2024), Finland shares the southern Allies’ concerns about Russian activities in the Middle East and West Africa and understands their concerns about terrorism. Although NATO has limited means to respond to these threats, increased EU-NATO cooperation should be encouraged. Finland also has experience in dealing with hybrid threats on its own borders

(Linnainmäki 2024). Finland recognizes that terrorism will remain a prominent and persistent threat for many NATO Allies, especially in Southern Europe. The official foreign and defense policy documents recognize terrorism as a “major threat to NATO Allies and EU Member States” (Government 2024a; Ministry of Defence of Finland 2024b).

As a new ally, Finland is eager to show solidarity and commitment to the security of its southern allies. However, as a small country, Finland has limited resources and bandwidth. Särkkä et al. (2024) note that this means that cooperation with allies, including in the South, must be prioritized according to strategic, military, and economic interests and needs (Särkkä et al. 2024). Accordingly, Finland will selectively seek opportunities to signal its commitment to the 360-degree approach, for example by participating in NATO’s collective peacetime missions outside its own neighborhood and by deepening bilateral defense cooperation with a few southern allies. Through these actions, Finland hopes to foster trust and solidarity and to gain support for its own concerns, primarily the acute and persistent threat to the Alliance posed by Russia.

# 3

## The War in Ukraine: An Existential Question for Finnish Security

Finnish researchers and think tanks see the outcome of the war in Ukraine and the continued US commitment to NATO as the two most important factors affecting Finland's security in the near to medium term. Finland's principled support for Ukraine is based in part on its own historical experience during the Winter War and the Continuation War against the Soviet Union. Finland's goal is a sovereign, independent, and democratic Ukraine that is aligned with Western values and its security institutions. Finland supports Ukraine's membership in the European Union and NATO and has signed an agreement on security cooperation with Ukraine (Office of the President of the Republic of Finland 2024b). Public support in Finland for Ukraine remains high (Ministry of Defense of Finland 2024a). At the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, Finland made the historic decision to provide military assistance to a country at war for the first time, even though Finland was not protected by NATO's Article 5 guarantees at the time.

According to Minna Ålander (2024), Finland strongly rejected "Finlandization," the imposition of neutrality on Ukraine, as a permanent solution to the war. Forsberg and Pesu (2016) define Finlandization as a policy of accommodating Soviet interests during the Cold War, with the aim of preserving independence. In other words, it was a survival policy imposed on a country that had recently lost two successive wars against a powerful neighbor willing to use force to impose its will. Finland had no effective means of protection against the Soviet Union. The United Kingdom and France had been severely weakened by the Second World War. Germany, the European power generally interested in Finland, was devastated, divided, and occupied. The United States had no presence in northern Europe and no interest in challenging the Soviets so close to their own territory. Finlandization did not mean capitulation to all Soviet demands, but it did de facto limit Finland's sovereignty and foreign policy space (Forsberg and Pesu 2016). In the long run, Finlandization also had a corrupting effect on domestic politics. Close relations with the Soviet embassy and the Kremlin became a necessity for all mainstream political parties and leaders in the country (Ålander 2024).

Ukraine's situation cannot be compared with Finland's position after the Second World War. Ukraine is a large European country with a population of almost 40 million. After three years of war, it has not been forced to surrender and continues to receive, albeit insufficiently, Western financial and military aid. Moreover, Ukraine's geographic location means that if the country were to drift into Russia's sphere

of influence, it would pose serious military problems for NATO's collective defense planning. Saari and Karjalainen (2025) argue that the war is linked to the broader European security architecture. The way the war ends will either confirm or reject spheres of influence as the new norm in Europe (Saari and Karjalainen 2025).

Throughout the war, Finland has advocated a principled approach (Sky News 2022). President Alexander Stubb has often noted that Zelenskyi needs four elements to conclude peace: land, security guarantees from the US or NATO, reconstruction of Ukraine, and war crimes trials for atrocities committed by the Russians (Pelli 2024). In the aftermath of US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth's remarks to US allies that Ukraine will not become a NATO member or return to its pre-2014 borders, as well as the first phone call between Putin and Trump, this principled approach is largely null and void (Riley et al. 2025).

The Finnish strategic community is uncomfortable with the way the United States unilaterally dismissed the possibility of NATO membership for Ukraine prior to actual peace negotiations. European NATO allies have been left scrambling for a new tactic to secure their place in the upcoming peace negotiations. Tuomas Forsberg (Yle News 2025a) has argued that this turn raises serious concerns about US commitments to NATO's deterrence and collective defense, which need to be taken into account in Finland's official defense policy. The shift in US policy is forcing allies focused on collective defense to find a new balance between advocating deterrence of Russia and maintaining US commitment to their own security and defense. In the short term, Finland takes comfort in the fact that Secretary Hegseth has promised continued US commitment to NATO's collective defense (Hanska 2025).

According to Tyyne Karjalainen (2024), in order to avoid worst-case scenarios in Ukraine, the West needs to overcome its previous restrictions on military assistance, including on the use of certain types of weapons. Finland actively participates in the French- and UK-led European discussions on the creation of a European peacekeeping or reassurance force, but has ruled out contributing troops to the operation (Yle News 2025b). The Finnish government has dropped its long-standing opposition to joint debt financing for European defense as long as Finland is a beneficiary (Helsinki Times 2025b). Helsinki has also proposed financing defense projects through the European Investment Bank (EIB), but this initiative has met with resistance due to EU's taxonomy rules on sustainable financing (Finnish Government 2024c).

# 4

## Systematic Challenges

Researchers argue that Finland's role within NATO and its response to the Alliance's systematic challenges are shaped by the country's identity and geography. Hanna Ojanen (2024) links Finland's official foreign policy doctrine, value-based realism, to its domestic culture of debate. She argues that foreign policy consensus no longer serves Finland's interests in an increasingly dangerous and uncertain world. Iro Särkkä (2023) outlines three layers of Finland's foreign identity after NATO membership: European, Nordic, and Atlanticist. According to Särkkä, these identities share the same normative foundation, which includes support for democracy and human rights. The challenge for Finland will be to find a new balance between these overlapping identities on issues such as nuclear deterrence, hybrid threats, and relations with the United States.

Matti Pesu (2024a) characterizes Finland's position within NATO as an emerging Nordic-Atlantic orientation toward Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This orientation can be seen in Finland's integration into NATO's regional defense plan for Northern Europe and Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk in the United States. Pesu argues that the shift toward Nordic and Atlantic states is based on Finland's geography as a Baltic Sea state, an Arctic country, a frontline state bordering Russia, and its peripheral location relative to key Western allies (Pesu 2024). This orientation is likely to affect Finland's positioning within the Alliance. On the other hand, its durability largely depends on the Trump administration's policy toward NATO in general and Northern Europe in particular.

Finnish support for NATO membership remains high (82% in December 2024) (Ministry of Defence of Finland 2024a). The broad outlines of Finland's NATO policy have been agreed across the political spectrum as part of the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy (2024) and the Government Defence Report (2024). Individual issues, such as nuclear deterrence and defense budgets, have from time to time stimulated public debate, but have not generally weakened the political consensus. In academic and think tank circles, debates on the militarization of Finland's foreign, security and defense policies have gained traction (e.g., Kaarkoski, Häkkinen and Kilpeläinen 2024), but have not yet broken through into public debate. The broad political and elite consensus on NATO gives the government political leeway to define the country's profile in the Alliance.

### NATO as a Nuclear Alliance: Medium Ambition

Pesu and Iso-Markku (2024) see Russia's nuclear saber-rattling in Ukraine as one of the main drivers behind Finland's NATO application (Pesu and Iso-Markku 2024). Finland has no historical experience with nuclear planning, but has been an active supporter of the non-proliferation regime in the past. During NATO accession talks, Finland did not impose any restrictions on its full participation in NATO nuclear planning. Finland was one of the first countries to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Between 2012 and 2014, Finland facilitated talks for a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction and recently chaired the Preparatory Committee for the 2026 NPT Review Conference (Pesu and Juntunen 2023).

As a new NATO member, Finland has sought to "raise its nuclear IQ" by gathering information on nuclear weapons and related strategies. Matti Pesu and Tapio Juntunen (2023) have outlined various options for Finland's participation in NATO nuclear planning. Based on their definition, Finland's current approach can be characterized as one of medium ambition. Finland fully participates in the work of NATO's Nuclear Planning Group (NPG) and is willing to support conventional operational contributions, as evidenced by the participation of Finnish fighter jets in NATO's Steadfast Noon nuclear exercise (Yle News 2024b).

Public opinion is divided between general support for NATO's nuclear deterrent and reluctance to host nuclear weapons in Finland or have them transported through Finnish territory (University of Helsinki 2023). The Finnish Nuclear Energy Act prohibits the placement or transfer of nuclear weapons on Finnish territory. Following Finland's accession to NATO, there has been an ongoing political debate on whether the reform should include the lifting of these restrictions. For example, Veli-Pekka Tynkkynen has argued that, given the Trump administration's hostility toward Europe, the Nordic and Baltic states should consider acquiring their own nuclear deterrent together with Poland (Kapper 2025). For now, this view remains in the minority. Jyri Lavikainen (2024) has argued that China's rise as a "second nuclear peer" to the United States will strain American resources and thus weaken deterrence in Europe unless NATO's nuclear capability is strengthened and European allies invest more in conventional defense (Lavikainen 2024). The government has so far opted not to change the restrictions on nuclear weapons, which will help it avoid a messy domestic debate and preserve the

current political consensus on Finland's NATO policy. However, if the practicalities of NATO's nuclear strategy were to come into tension with national legislation, the law would likely come under scrutiny.

### **Hybrid and Asymmetric Threats: the “Finnish model” as a response?**

The Finnish expert discussion on Russian hybrid operations against the country has largely focused on two threats: the weaponization of migrants and cable and pipeline disruptions in the Baltic Sea caused by cargo ships traveling to or from Russia. In 2023, Russian authorities and smugglers began to facilitate the transportation of migrants to Finnish border crossings. Previously, the Russian Border Service, which is part of the Federal Security Service (FSB), had stopped attempts by migrants to reach the Finnish-Russian border without proper visa documents. The sudden change in behavior, the control of the Border Service by the FSB, a similar operation in 2015–2016, and Russia's promise to respond in time to Finland's NATO membership led both authorities, politicians, and researchers to conclude that this was an active Russian hybrid operation (Lavikainen 2023). The situation stabilized after Finland unilaterally closed all border crossings on its side of the Finnish-Russian border and enacted legislation to deter migrants from attempting to cross illegally (Finnish Government 2024b).

Geographically, Finland is an island locked in the north-eastern corner of Europe. The country is highly dependent on the Baltic Sea for its security of supply and trade. Approximately 96 percent of Finland's imports and exports pass through the Baltic Sea. In a period of 18 months, there have been five incidents in which cargo ships have caused damage to undersea infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. Jukka Savolainen of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats notes that given the high number of incidents in a short period of time, it is impossible for them all to be accidents. Savolainen notes that the difficulty of attributing incidents to a state actor is part of the nature of hostile hybrid operations, but it is clear that “someone is doing something” (Kuuskoski 2025).

Finland has responded strongly to suspicions of Russian operations against undersea infrastructure. This has included the seizure of a cargo ship suspected of damaging infrastructure and the initiation of legal proceedings against the crew and the shipping company. This has been referred to as the “Finnish model” for dealing with such incidents. Finland also welcomed NATO's Baltic Sentry enhanced vigilance activity, which increased surveillance of ship movements and signaled to Russia NATO's determination to deter any military threats in the Baltic Sea (Office of the President of the Republic of Finland 2025). A weakness of the “Finnish model” is that it relies on the voluntary cooperation of the ship and its crew to enter national territorial waters.

Joel Linnainmäki notes that there is no such thing as perfect security. If a state actor has malicious intent, it will find new ways to cause harm. However, the measures taken by national governments, the EU and NATO will increase the costs of such actions for the companies that operate and own ships suspected of damaging infrastructure and for the crews responsible for safe navigation (Freyborg 2025). The Finnish strategic community believes that responding to hybrid and asymmetric threats requires both national resilience and coherent EU and NATO strategies. In the run-up to the NATO Summit in Washington in 2022, Finland strongly pushed for hybrid threats to be mentioned in the summit declaration. This included reaffirming the Allies' belief that hybrid threats could rise to the level of an armed attack and result in NATO invoking an Article 5 collective defense response. NATO's role will largely be to support national authorities, maintain situational awareness, provide intelligence, and maintain military deterrence against adversaries. For example, the Baltic Sentry operation is intended to send a strategic signal to Russia about NATO's deterrence, in line with the Alliance's Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA).

### **The Transatlantic Relationship: Keep Calm but Prepare**

The United States is the only transatlantic power that can provide Finland with credible security guarantees against Russia. Finland considers the continued US commitment to its security, to NATO's collective defense, and to the American military presence in Northern Europe to be critical to its security. Finland considers the United States its “key strategic partner and ally” (Finnish Government 2024a).

President Alexander Stubb has emphasized that Finland is seen as a security producer in the United States and that there is no need for alarmism. According to Stubb, the best way to maintain US commitment to Europe is not to ask what the US can do for Europe, but what Europe can do for the US (Helsingin Sanomat 2025). However, Trump's presidency is straining confidence in the United States among the population. Only 33 percent of Finns believe that the United States would defend Finland or other NATO allies if they were attacked (Kansanen 2025). Juhana Aunesluoma argues that Donald Trump also poses a threat to American democracy and sees Europe as an ideological competitor. Dealing with the new administration will require striking a balance between values and realism. Europe must be as realistic as possible in its analysis of the changing transatlantic relationship, while maintaining a working relationship with the United States. Johanna Vuorelma emphasizes that this does not mean that Finland should abandon its values or traditional relationships, for example with Denmark in the debate over Greenland. (Myllymäki 2025) For now, the United States has signaled that while Europe must take responsibility for its own defense, the US will remain committed to NATO (Riley et al. 2025). Pesu and Wallenius (2025) outline three alternative plans for Finland in its quest for

stability. Plan A is to maintain the transatlantic relationship and the American commitment to NATO. But since this plan looks increasingly fragile, Plan B is to invest in defense cooperation with key European partners, notably the Nordic countries, the United Kingdom and France. This includes supporting increased EU-NATO cooperation and strengthening the European Union's role in defense. According to Pesu and Wallenius (2025), if European deterrence and collective defense were to collapse, Finland could, as a last resort, and only reluctantly, explore the possibility of rapprochement with Russia. They do not outline what this worst-case scenario would entail or whether it would be a realistic political solution in practice.

## **NATO as a Political Community: Values versus Realism**

Bradley Reynolds (2023) notes that while Finland applied for NATO membership for practical security reasons, many in Finland also saw it as the final step in the country's long and arduous march toward Western security institutions and their values-based community. During the Cold War, Finland was a "neutral" country, but within the Soviet sphere of influence. After the Cold War, Finland aligned itself with Western Europe by joining the European Union, but remained militarily non-aligned. From this perspective, NATO's role as a political and value community is seen as important in Finland.

Finland and Sweden learned the hard way about the limits of both dimensions during their accession negotiations with Turkey and Hungary. During the public debate on Finland's membership application in the spring of 2022, Li Andersson, then leader of the Left Alliance (2022) political party, highlighted the tensions between NATO's values and the policies of some of its member states, such as the United States, Hungary, and Turkey. Anderson argued that Finland can and should actively continue its previous values-based foreign policy, even if this leads to tensions with some member states, including the United States.

Matti Pesu (2024b) analyzes that Finland's official foreign policy doctrine of value-based realism reflects Finland's recognition of its limited capabilities and the need to cooperate with countries that do not share its Western values. Finland has a long history of dealing with great power "spoilers" and difficult actors, such as the Soviet Union. This experience will help Finland maintain pragmatic relations with those countries that do not share Finland's liberal orientation, including within NATO.

With Donald Trump sitting behind the resolute desk in the White House, there is a growing debate in Finland about how to balance values and realism in the country's relationship with the United States. So far, this has been evident in the debate over Greenland. Finland has supported Denmark, but has not publicly criticized the Trump administration for its aggressive approach. Former foreign trade minister Pertti

Salolainen notes that Finland has been accused of appeasing Russia for decades. The question now is whether the country will become "Finlandized" toward the Trump administration (Pilke 2025). Expert Risto E. J. Penttilä interprets Trump as a "Trotskyite" in the sense that he is trying to export his MAGA ideology globally (Kajander 2025). This will be a challenge. Finland's priority will be to preserve NATO as the primary forum for transatlantic dialogue on issues affecting the security of the allies.

# 5 Summary

In this final section, I will summarize and assess how the Finnish strategic community views threats to NATO and responses to contain those threats, as outlined above.

## Assessing the Salience of Threats

For the Finnish strategic community, Finland and NATO face a difficult and increasingly dangerous threat environment. Russia is a direct and persistent threat that will not disappear with the end of the war in Ukraine. China's strategic partnership with Russia and questions about its approach to Taiwan are a source of tension with NATO. The southern flank faces real, if not existential, threats related to terrorism and energy security. Russia's nuclear saber-rattling and China's growing nuclear capabilities demand the Alliance's vigilance. Table 1. below summarizes the Finnish discourse on these threats according to the level of tension between the threat and NATO and the possible risk of war.

For Finland, Russia is and will remain the dominant threat direction. In national discourses, the war in Ukraine is often framed in existential terms due to Finland's own historical experiences and its long shared border with Russia. The level of tension between NATO and Russia is seen as high due to Russia's war in Ukraine and its hostile hybrid actions against the West.

The risk of war is seen as medium. There is no immediate threat of war between Finland and Russia or NATO and Russia, but the possibility of war cannot be excluded. The level of tension and the risk of war depend in part on how the war in Ukraine ends and on the future of the US commitment to European security. Researchers see that if Rus-

sia is able to bend Ukraine to its will, it will likely continue to pursue an aggressive imperialist policy. This would increase both tensions and the threat of war. However, a continued and credible US commitment to NATO would correspondingly reduce the threat of war, as Russia has been unwilling to directly test NATO's Article 5 commitments.

Tensions with China have risen slowly in recent years and are considered to be at a medium level. Frictions relate to its economic and trade policies, US-China relations, Taiwan, human rights issues, and its strategic partnership with Russia. Joint Sino-Russian military exercises and the involvement of Chinese-owned vessels in cable and pipeline ruptures in the Baltic Sea raise serious questions about the extent of their relationship. Researchers argue that Finland should seek to maintain a pragmatic relationship with China, but it cannot ignore the increasing US pressure for NATO to tighten its approach to China or China's own actions in the Euro-Atlantic area. Despite heightened tensions, the actual risk of war between NATO and China is seen as low and could be considered negligible were it not for the superpower rivalry between the United States and China.

NATO's southern flank is seen as facing real and credible threats, such as terrorism and energy security. However, despite the war in Gaza and the change of government in Syria, the level of tension in this direction is generally seen by Finnish researchers as low in terms of NATO's military deterrence. Accordingly, the threat of a war or conflict into which NATO might be drawn is considered negligible.

Nuclear weapons are a complex security issue for NATO. Russia's nuclear saber-rattling in Ukraine has caused deep anxiety and concern in the Finnish strategic community, and

*Assessing the Finnish strategic community's views on threats affecting NATO*

Table 1

Threat	Russia	China	South	Nuclear weapons
Level of Tension	High	Medium	Low	Russia: Medium China: Low, but Rising
Risk of War	Medium (Rising)	Low	Negligeable	Low/Negligeable

	Russia	China	NATO		Ukraine	
<b>Issue</b>	Deterrence vs. cooperative security?	Partnering vs. hedging?	US hegemony vs. Europeanization?	Collective defense vs. global NATO?	Alliance of values vs. interests?	All-in or fast-out?
<b>Response</b>	Strong focus on long-term deterrence.	Maintain a pragmatic partnership, but de-risk and respect US interests.	Seek to maintain US hegemony by investing in European defense.	Maintain a strong focus on collective defense.	Uphold values, but not at the cost of core security interests.	All-in, but without exposing NATO's deterrence.

the level of tension is considered to be at a medium level. For Finland, the continued existence of a credible NATO nuclear deterrent is key, and the US should be at the center of it. Despite nuclear threats from Russia, it has refrained from using nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Considering the impracticability of such weapons to influence the battlefield and the deep international taboo on the use of nuclear weapons, the actual risk of war is considered low.

Finally, the Finnish strategic community hopes to maintain a pragmatic relationship with China. At the same time, there are growing calls for de-risking in economically strategic areas and for respect for key US interests. This likely means that Finland will be willing to support a gradual tightening of NATO's language and policies toward China, as long as this does not mean shifting the Alliance's focus away from collective defense tasks in Europe.

### Summarizing Predominant Responses

The Finnish strategic community considers it crucial to “keep the Americans in and the Russians out” in the classical sense. To contain the long-term threat posed by Russia, Finnish scholars emphasize the need for NATO to maintain its current focus on conventional deterrence and collective defense, rather than engage in new global expeditionary operations or crisis management. To maintain the US commitment to NATO, scholars say it is critical to respond to the Trump administration's criticism of European allies by strengthening NATO's European pillar (Table 2).

Finland is a firm and principled supporter of Ukraine. Researchers believe it is important to uphold Ukraine's right to apply for NATO membership and the collective commitments NATO made to Ukraine in Bucharest in 2008 and in Washington in 2024. This is not least due to Ukraine's support for Finland's own membership bid in the spring of 2022 and the fear of Russia gaining a veto over NATO enlargement. However, most researchers are reluctant to take any steps that could significantly weaken Finland's security or NATO's collective defense, such as sending Finnish troops to Ukraine as part of peace negotiations. This also applies to how Finland views NATO's values versus interests dimension. The Finnish strategic community considers NATO's role as a Euro-Atlantic community of shared values to be important. However, there is a reluctance to defend values if it comes at a high cost to core security interests, such as maintaining the US commitment to NATO.

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## About the author

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## The Future of NATO – Country Report Finland

NATO has been a key security pillar of German and European defence policy from the very outset. Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has undergone a series of international transformations and realignments, driven by developments in the global security environment and pressure from its own member states.

While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has strengthened NATO's self-perception as a key guarantor of collective security, the change in US administration at the beginning of 2025 raises fundamental questions once again. What role will the US play in Europe's future security, and how might European nations respond to the situation?

This publication is part of a Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung study entitled "The Future of NATO", which summarises and analyses the ongoing debates on the Alliance and current security challenges in 11 member and 4 non-member states. These country studies form the basis of an overarching publication which seeks to provide possible answers to the unresolved questions and propose potential scenarios for the future of NATO.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

➔ [fes.de](https://fes.de)