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# Finland: The Ally Who Came in from the Cold

Léo PÉRIA-PEIGNÉ

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# Executive summary

Among all European countries, Finland is perhaps the one whose strategic culture and military model have changed the least since the end of the Cold War. Built after the end of the Second World War to deter a potential new Soviet invasion, this model enabled Finland to serve as an example of European rearmament. With its few million inhabitants, Finland has thus established a culture of total defense that is rare in Europe, combining concern for food and energy self-sufficiency, the protection of the population, and the preservation of the conscription model to enable the country to defend itself.

Formalized in 2023, Finland's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has profoundly transformed Finnish strategy, which is now part of a broader European alliance facing Russia. While the links between Helsinki and the Atlantic Alliance are in fact older, accession remained a major political taboo, with neutrality long perceived as a guarantee of peace. Finland can therefore now integrate into a larger military structure while maintaining a regional dynamic revitalized since 2022 through the Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEF).

From a military perspective, the Finnish armed forces were adapted from the outset to face a conflict with the Soviet, and later Russian, neighbor. The land forces are therefore structured around an extensive conscription model that makes the defense of the territory a matter for every citizen. More austere than most European forces, they seek to rely on their knowledge of the harsh Finnish environment to sustain an elastic defense if Russia attacks. For its part, the Finnish navy possesses limited means but retains rare naval mining capabilities to deny the adversary access to its coasts or even to isolate it at the end of the Gulf of Karelia. Moreover, modernizing the fleet and acquiring larger vessels could open new tactical opportunities. Finally, the Finnish air force relies on a logic of dispersal of its assets to guarantee its survival, a logic that could be called into question by the acquisition of F-35 fighter-bombers, which are far more complex to operate from improvised infrastructure.

Long-standing relations between Paris and Helsinki have intensified since the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine and France's pivot to the East. This dynamic still needs to be confirmed over time, but it opens new prospects for the French armed forces. The multiplication of joint exercises across the different domains is, in this respect, an encouraging signal.

# Résumé

De tous les pays européens, la Finlande est peut-être celui dont la culture stratégique et le modèle militaire ont le moins évolué depuis la fin de la guerre froide. Bâti après la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale pour faire face à une nouvelle invasion soviétique, ce modèle permet à la Finlande de faire figure de modèle pour le réarmement européen. Avec ses quelques millions d'habitants, la Finlande a ainsi établi une culture de défense totale devenue rare en Europe, alliant souci d'auto-suffisance alimentaire et énergétique, protection des populations et préservation du modèle de conscription afin de permettre au pays de se défendre par lui-même.

Actée en 2023, l'adhésion à l'Organisation du traité de l'Atlantique nord a bouleversé la stratégie finlandaise, désormais incluse au sein d'une alliance européenne élargie face à la Russie. Si les liens entre Helsinki et l'Alliance atlantique sont en réalité plus anciens, l'adhésion est longtemps restée un tabou politique majeur, la neutralité ayant longtemps été perçue comme un gage de paix. La Finlande peut donc désormais s'intégrer à une structure militaire plus large, tout en conservant une dynamique régionale, revivifiée depuis 2022 par la Coopération nordique de défense.

D'un point de vue militaire, les forces finlandaises se sont adaptées dès l'origine pour faire face à un conflit avec le voisin soviétique puis russe. Les forces terrestres sont ainsi articulées autour d'un modèle de conscription étendu faisant de la défense du territoire l'affaire de tous. Plus rustiques que la plupart des forces européennes, elles cherchent à s'appuyer sur leur connaissance d'un milieu finlandais difficile pour soutenir une défense élastique face à une agression russe. De son côté, la marine finlandaise dispose de moyens limités mais conserve des capacités de minage naval devenues rares pour interdire l'accès de ses côtes à l'adversaire, voire en l'isolant au fond du golfe de Carélie. La modernisation de la flotte et l'acquisition de navires de plus grande taille pourraient en outre lui ouvrir de nouvelles perspectives tactiques. Enfin, la force aérienne finlandaise s'appuie sur une logique de dispersion des moyens pour garantir sa survie, une logique qui pourrait être remise en cause par l'acquisition de chasseurs-bombardiers F-35, bien plus complexes à mettre en œuvre depuis des infrastructures improvisées.

Longtemps limitées, les relations entre Paris et Helsinki se sont intensifiées après le déclenchement du conflit en Ukraine et le pivot vers l'Est de la France. Cette dynamique doit encore se confirmer dans le temps, mais elle ouvre de nouvelles perspectives pour les forces françaises. La multiplication des exercices communs dans les différents milieux constitue, à ce titre, un signal encourageant.

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# Introduction

When a journalist asked him in 2001 how to sum up Finnish strategic culture, former Finnish president Mauno Koivisto, born in 1923, replied: “survive”.<sup>1</sup> Terse, this answer reflects the substance of Finland’s strategic stakes over more than a century in the face of a persistent Russian threat. Detached from the Russian sphere after a century of occupation and a bloody civil war in the early 1920s, Finland again confronted Moscow during the Winter War of 1939 and the Continuation War (1941-1945). Although it was not turned into a satellite like the “sister republics” of Eastern Europe, Finland lost 20% of its territory, annexed by Russia, and was forced into neutrality between the two Cold War blocs by the Treaty of Friendship of 1948.

This *status quo* imposed on Finland was then regarded as a lesser evil and an indispensable guarantee of survival, so glaring was the imbalance in the balance of power. This country of 5.6 million inhabitants, with a gross domestic product (GDP) equivalent to that of Portugal, shares more than 1,300 kilometers (km) of border with its Russian neighbor. Most of the population and economic activity is concentrated in the southwest of a country whose territory lies, for the most part, less than 250 km from Russia. Limited and precarious strategic depth, together with the memory of past wars, thus shaped the development of a national strategic culture combining realism, preparation for the worst, and a determination to remain independent.

Accession to the European Union (EU) in 1995 marked a significant step in the evolution of Finnish neutrality, but it was accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April 2023 that marked a final and definitive break with the *status quo* in place since 1948. Driven by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, such a shift would have been considered unthinkable only a few years earlier by a Finnish population eager to avoid any provocation toward Moscow. Long below 30%, support for NATO accession soared from March 2022, reaching 80% of favorable opinions.<sup>2</sup> One year later, Finland became the 31<sup>st</sup> member of the Atlantic Alliance after seven decades of neutrality. The weakness of the Russian reaction, moreover, underscores the emptiness of Moscow’s official rhetoric on NATO enlargement.

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1. U. Hämäläinen, “Koivisto Knew His Big Neighbor”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, April 18, 2022, available at: [www.hs.fi](http://www.hs.fi).

2. *Defence information, Bulletins and Reports*, Finnish Ministry of Defence, December 2024.

As a new ally, Helsinki brings its share of opportunities and vulnerabilities to NATO. The 1,340 km of Finnish-Russian border are thus added to the 1,230 km between the Alliance's member states and Russia, doubling the potential surface of geographic friction. This new NATO border is, moreover, made up essentially of forest, lake, and Arctic or sub-Arctic regions, all particularly difficult environments to which the Alliance's forces are relatively unaccustomed. Russian proximity and difficult terrain have nonetheless contributed to maintaining a military instrument of a scale unusual for a nation of this size. Indeed, Finland's accession brings NATO a militarily capable ally with a model of "total defense" that has been very little affected by the peace dividend.

Finland indeed possesses military capabilities that are uncommon within the Alliance. The land forces rely on a well-honed and effective conscription and reserve mechanism, which is already drawing the attention of other European nations considering its reintroduction, such as Germany<sup>3</sup> or Poland.<sup>4</sup> Limited in size, the Finnish navy has retained unique capabilities for laying naval mines for both defensive and offensive purposes, which are particularly relevant in a shallow, enclosed sea like the Baltic. For its part, the Finnish air force bases its resilience on its ability to disperse its aircraft and personnel across a large number of civilian airfields in order to limit the effects of enemy strikes on its usual bases. More broadly, the Finnish model is finally characterized by close civil-military cooperation to prepare the country, its infrastructure, and its economy to survive a possible conflict with Russia, a possibility never eclipsed in Finnish strategic perception.

Bilateral Franco-Finnish relations long remained limited, particularly in defense matters, with the exception of a joint declaration on European defense in 2018.<sup>5</sup> Here again, the conflict in Ukraine, Finland's accession to NATO, and the French pivot to the Eastern Flank have led to an intensification of exchanges, with the French armed forces becoming increasingly present in the country *via* exercises,<sup>6</sup> port calls,<sup>7</sup> or visits,<sup>8</sup> whether within the NATO framework or through bilateral relations.

As France seeks to adapt its forces to the high-intensity paradigm after three decades of overseas operations, richer Franco-Finnish relations are an

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3. P. Maurice, "Allemagne, retour du service militaire ?", *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 91, No. 1, Ifri, 2026.

4. L. Péria-Peigné and A. Zima, "Pologne, première armée d'Europe en 2035 ? Perspectives et limites d'un réarmement", *Ifri Studies*, Ifri, February 2025, available at: [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

5. "Déclaration franco-finlandaise sur la défense européenne", Élysée, August 2018.

6. E. Bouteillier, "Épreuve de force au-delà du cercle polaire", *Terremag*, December 11, 2024, available at: [www.terremag.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.terremag.defense.gouv.fr).

7. "Escale de la frégate ACONIT à Helsinki", French Embassy in Finland, November 26, 2025, available at: <https://fi.ambafrance.org>.

8. "Le CEMA en voyage officiel en Finlande", French Defence Staff, April 21, 2023, available at: [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr).

excellent opportunity to become reacquainted with capabilities lost to the peace dividend, or to develop new ones.

Studying the Finnish military model first requires a better understanding of its origins and of its holistic application to every aspect of daily life and of the citizen's trajectory, Finland having managed to combine substantial militarization with democracy (I). The specific features of the Finnish model can then be understood through an examination of its different branches, distinctive both for their reduced size and for combat capabilities that have become rare in Europe (II). The prospects for Franco-Finnish cooperation can then be addressed more concretely, taking into account the priorities and needs of each actor (III). For the sake of concision and accessibility, the aim of this study is not to provide an exhaustive account of all the dynamics at play, particularly capability-related ones, but to provide the keys to understanding the main Finnish perspectives.

# **Surviving next to Russia: a specialized strategic culture**

Shaped by past wars and the permanent proximity of the Russian threat, Finland has developed a distinctive national strategic culture, combining preparation for the worst, liberal democracy, and extensive conscription. Strongly tied to a singular Finnish history, the Finnish model may be difficult to imitate or reproduce, but it is necessary to understand its specific features, in particular the holistic character of its system, which shapes the most varied aspects of how the country functions. NATO accession, the product of an abrupt acceleration of events in 2022, must, moreover, be made concrete and anchored in the functioning of a country accustomed to relying only on itself.

## **Between preparing for the worst and forced neutrality**

Understanding Finnish strategic culture requires knowing a few milestones that explain Finland's particular relationship with its security. Helsinki broke away from Russia during the disintegration of the Russian Empire in 1917 and experienced its own civil war in 1918, between a conservative White Guard supported by Germany and a socialist—but scarcely revolutionary—Red Guard. The latter was ultimately defeated, but the trauma of the atrocities helped establish a calm, compromise-oriented political life that endures to this day. In 1939, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) attacked Finland which, despite a heroic defense against a far more numerous Soviet army, lost in particular Karelia, annexed by Moscow to gain strategic depth around Saint Petersburg. The Continuation War, launched alongside Nazi Germany in 1941, sought to recover these territories, which accounted for more than 12% of the national population and economic potential. Finland managed to avoid complete satellization by the USSR by withdrawing from the conflict earlier than the countries of Eastern Europe, but the Treaty of Paris signed in 1947 imposed on it a regime of forced neutrality that would shape its relationship to strategic affairs for more than half a century.

Imposed by the USSR, this treaty drastically limited the size of the Finnish forces to 34,000 active-duty personnel and around sixty aircraft, and restricted the Finnish fleet to vessels of less than 10,000 tons, while prohibiting it from using submarines, mines, and torpedoes. These limitations would, in particular, help anchor the Finnish conscription

model around more “austere” weapons such as artillery, notably antipersonnel mines, conceived as a means of offsetting the permanent numerical imbalance and whose absence had weighed heavily during the Winter War.<sup>9</sup>

Although it was neither annexed nor turned into a satellite, Finland was placed in a posture of forced neutrality often summed up by the concept of “Finlandization,” a term little appreciated locally.<sup>10</sup> Moscow’s objective was to turn its neighbor into a non-threatening buffer state kept away from the dynamics of the Cold War and, above all, from NATO. Constrained in its diplomacy and its defense capabilities, Finland therefore developed a strategic culture centered on the persistence of the Russian threat and the need to defend itself alone, outside any alliance. This realization led to the development of the concept of total defense (*kokonaismaanpuolustus*), formalized during the 1970s and 1980s and geared toward involving the entire country, its population, and its institutions in the survival of the weak against the strong. Finland must thus be able to defend itself alone in order to survive, and therefore maintain a maximum level of preparedness, but it must do so quietly so as not to provoke an excessive reaction from its neighbor. Summed up in the interviews by the idea of a “small-state realism”, this approach is constitutive of Finnish strategic culture.<sup>11</sup>

This forced isolation nevertheless began to change at the end of the Cold War. Accession to the Partnership for Peace in 1994 and then to the EU in 1995 were major steps toward ending the regime imposed by the Treaty of Paris. Engaged in peace-keeping operations since 1956, the Finnish forces developed a more pronounced expeditionary vocation with the creation of a deployable combined-arms force at the end of the 1990s. A strategy of association with NATO also took shape, with a permanent Finnish representation at Mons and Norfolk.<sup>12</sup> The mobilization model inherited from the Cold War was reformed several times during the 2000s in order to facilitate deployments abroad and the use of force in the context of these missions.<sup>13</sup>

The 2008 model can be seen as a major turning point, with a significant reduction in personnel, a modernization of equipment, greater centralization of command at the expense of regional structures, and the pursuit of better international integration. To this end, the Pori Brigade,

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9. “Finland Formally Withdraws from Ottawa Landmine Treaty”, *YLE News*, July 11, 2025, available at: <https://yle.fi>.

10. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

11. *Ibid.*

12. R. Razoux, “Le modèle 2008 de l’armée finlandaise”, *Raids*, October 5, 2018, available at: <https://raids.fr>.

13. “Act on Military Crisis Management”, Finnish Ministry of Defense, March 31, 2006, available at: [www.finlex.fi](http://www.finlex.fi).

one of the largest units of the Finnish land forces, was notably specialized in force projection.<sup>14</sup> This drive toward greater international orientation, similar to the one envisaged by Poland between 2000 and 2008, did not, however, eclipse the total-defense model. The latter indeed returned in force after 2014, as the Russian threat regained an importance and a reality that it had in fact never truly lost.

## NATO accession: rupture or continuity?

Presented as a radical break, Finland's NATO accession, formalized in 2023, can be seen as the culmination of the step-by-step strategy initiated as early as 1990. The NATO option was not unthinkable in Finnish strategic thinking; it was even present in the electoral platforms of political parties as early as 2004, but for a long time it garnered only limited approval.<sup>15</sup> A majority of Finns thus remained opposed to any accession, partly for ideological reasons inherited from the Cold War, but above all in order to avoid a change to this *status quo* that might be perceived as a provocation toward Russia, at the risk of repeating historical conflicts. This concern was, moreover, revived after the annexation of Crimea, an event that, on the contrary, prompted other states to take their alliances and defense policies into their own hands in the face of Russia.<sup>16</sup> Finland's implementation of the post-2014 international sanctions nevertheless led to a considerable slowdown in cross-border trade between the two countries, allowing for a smooth evolution of the *status quo*, with certain border regions depending heavily on this trade. Vladimir Putin's December 2021 speech on NATO enlargement was also seen by some as the definitive end of the NATO option.<sup>17</sup>

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, brought about a profound reversal of opinion, which shifted to more than 70% in favor of rapid accession. This rapid accession was made possible by the scale of the work carried out in the preceding decades, enabling the Finnish forces to enter squarely into an Alliance whose procedures and standards they had already largely adopted. More than a radical turn, accession was therefore a final step, precipitated by international events. Finnish signaling toward Russia was, moreover, careful to present its accession in this way in order to play down the idea of an abrupt and potentially threatening break, while facilitating its acceptance by the fraction of the Finnish population that was still hostile to it.<sup>18</sup> The political consensus on the subject nevertheless appears firmly established, and dissenting voices remain very few. Unlike

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14. R Razoux, "Le modèle 2008 de l'armée finlandaise", *op. cit.*

15. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

16. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

17. A. Roth, "Putin Warns of Possible Military Response over 'Aggressive' Nato", *The Guardian*, December 21, 2021.

18. *Ibid.*

other countries such as Poland, the consequences of accession did not provoke any economic or social discontent that could be exploited politically—a political niche that could be perceived as too favorable to Russia to be profitable in Finland.

NATO accession will now have to be translated into concrete terms, since Finland can no longer envisage defending itself as it would have before joining. Beyond issues of interoperability, infrastructure, and mobility, it is at the level of operational concepts that the evolution must take place. In the event of a Russian attack, Finland would indeed favor an elastic defense in order to draw the adversary onto familiar and particularly difficult terrain. Conversely, the Baltic states and Poland would favor a firm forward defense in order to preserve their territorial integrity from invasion. These two conceptions must now be reconciled, taking into account the imperatives of each, while Finland must undertake a deeper evolution and move from a strategic culture of “surviving alone” to “winning together”.

Within NATO itself, Finland has privileged circles and partnerships that structure its cooperation. The Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFECO), created in 2009, gives concrete form to a long-standing regional dynamic bringing together Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland through joint military development programs, such as the acquisition of a standardized uniform launched in 2015 and finalized in 2022.<sup>19</sup> Long limited by the absence of strategic urgency, this organization saw an acceleration in 2014 that strengthened after 2022, in cooperation with NATO, of which all NORDEFECO members are now part.<sup>20</sup>

While Finland is a Nordic country, it is neither a Scandinavian nor a Baltic country, which places it in a complex in-between position.<sup>21</sup> The interviews conducted for this study underscored Helsinki’s complex relationship with its southern neighbors. In the early 2000s, the poor relations between the Baltic states and Russia were perceived as a risk factor by Finland. NATO accession should help to soften these relations between what are now allies, notably by authorizing Finnish aircraft to intercept Russian planes in the airspace of the Baltic states.<sup>22</sup> The coherence of an Eastern Flank reshaped by Finnish accession also depends on a Finnish-Baltic relationship based on trust and cooperation.

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19. “New Uniform – Nordic Combat Uniform System”, Norwegian Armed Forces, January 24, 2025, available at: [www.forsvaret.no](http://www.forsvaret.no).

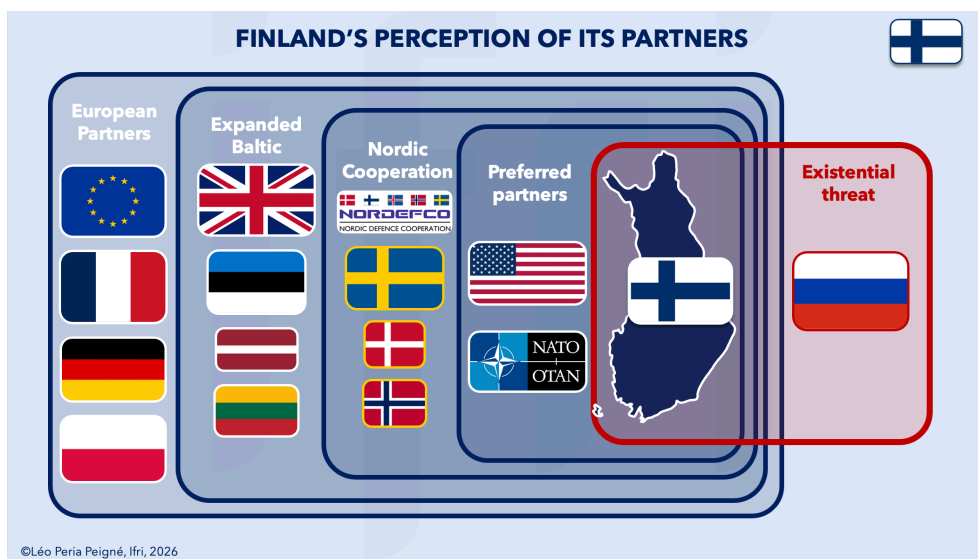
20. J. Tarociński, “Nordic Countries: a Common Vision for the Development of Defence Cooperation”, Centre for Eastern Studies, May 8, 2024, available at: [www.osw.waw.pl](http://www.osw.waw.pl).

21. “The Evolving Meaning of the ‘Baltic’ Countries”, *The Northern Voices*, October 9, 2025, available at: [www.thenorthernvoices.com](http://www.thenorthernvoices.com).

22. “Yle: Finnish Fighter Jets May Soon Be Able to Fly in Estonian Airspace”, *ERR News*, October 15, 2025, available at: <https://news.err.ee>.

Within the framework of a broader Baltic region and a shared Protestant culture, Finland also maintains relations with Germany, but above all with Great Britain, whose lasting engagement in the region gives it particular weight, notably through the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) as a framework for specific exercises and cooperation.<sup>23</sup> Its accelerated development after 2022 makes it one of the key elements of Finnish regional strategy, including within NATO.<sup>24</sup>

**Figure I-1: Finland's Perception of Its Partners**



Sources: interviews.

Despite everything, the transatlantic relationship appears to occupy a priority place in the Finnish strategic landscape. Signed in December 2023, the bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreement symbolizes the intensification of defense relations between Helsinki and Washington, notably by allowing US forces to have bases and prepositioned stocks in the country.<sup>25</sup> The interviews conducted for this study unanimously underscored the importance of this relationship, with the United States being perceived, including after the election of Donald Trump, as a reliable provider of security—a reputation that European institutions and countries still lack.<sup>26</sup> The importance of the relationship with Washington is also illustrated by the increase in the staff of defense missions in Helsinki. The United States thus maintains a three-person mission, compared with two for the United

23. "JEF Cooperation", Finnish Defense Forces, available at: <https://puolustusvoimat.fi>.

24. A. Pihlajamaa, "The Joint Expeditionary Force in Northern Europe: Towards a More Integrated Security", *Briefing Paper*, No. 389, Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA), May 2024, available at: <https://fii.fi>.

25. J. Linnainmäki, "Finnish-US Negotiations for a Defense Cooperation Agreement: First Steps as a NATO Ally", *Comment*, No. 7, FIIA, July 2023, available at: <https://fii.fi>.

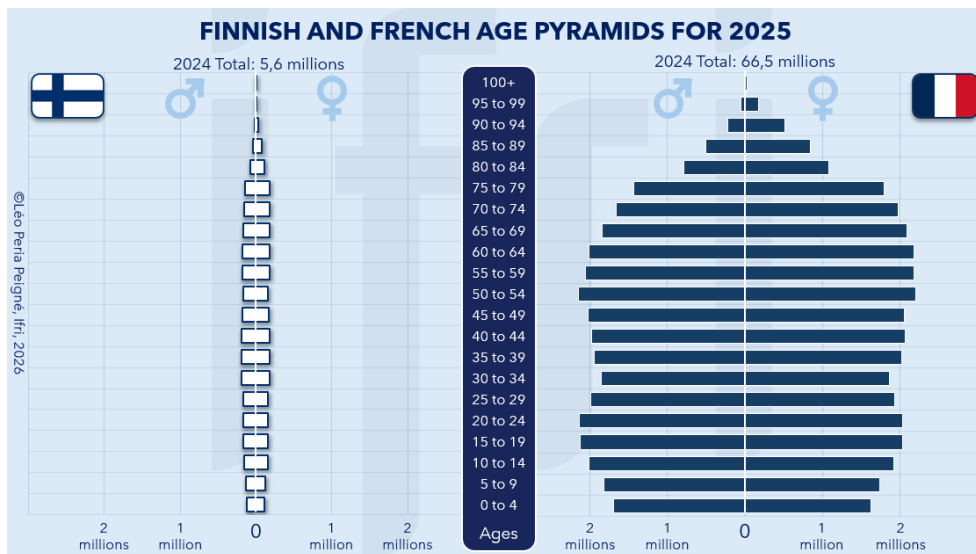
26. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

Kingdom and Poland, while most other NATO nations have only one (such as France), or even maintain a regionalized presence, often based in Sweden.<sup>27</sup>

## Finnish total defense

Despite its surface area, Finland remains a small country whose population and own resources remain limited, *a fortiori* in the face of a far larger and more populous neighbor. This disproportion is particularly acute in the demographic sphere, with Finland's 5.6 million citizens in 2025 facing nearly 144 million Russian citizens.

**Figure I-2: Finnish and French Age Pyramids in 2025**

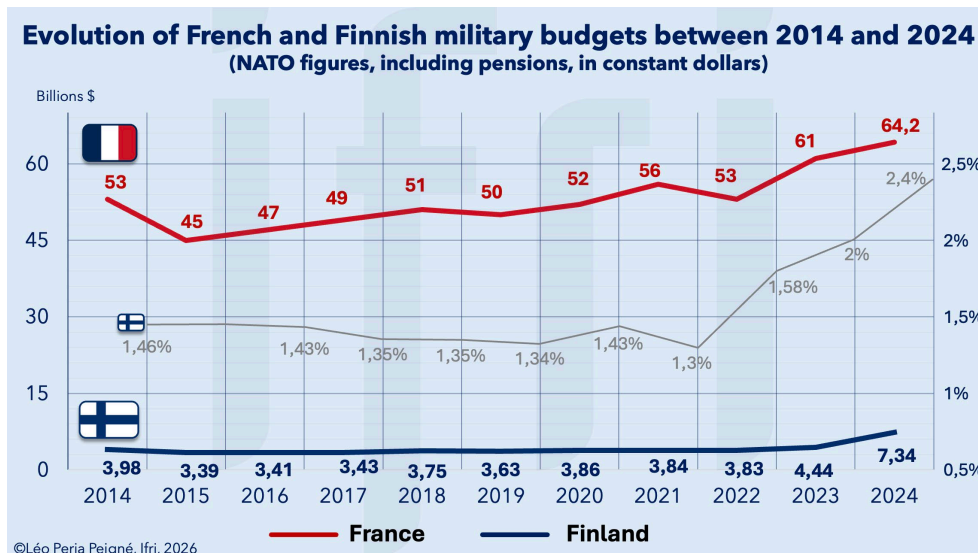


Source: World Bank.

This enduring disproportion has driven Finland to develop a singular culture of total defense, perceptible across a wide range of civilian domains, with a high level of preparedness of the population and infrastructure for the constraints of a crisis period that goes beyond the sole case of armed conflict. The pervasiveness of this culture also makes it possible to offset a military budget that is limited and stable over the years. While most European countries were beginning even a timid reinvestment in their defense tools after 2014 and the annexation of Crimea, the Finnish budget followed the opposite trend, falling from four billion constant dollars in 2014 to a historic low of 3.41 billion in 2016, before a very limited rebound up to 2021.

27. *Ibid.*

**Figure I-3: Trends in French and Finnish Military Budgets between 2014 and 2024**



Source: World Bank.

The war in Ukraine has, however, driven a sweeping renewed increase and a near doubling over three years. The 2024 budget thus reached \$7.3 billion, or 2.4% of Finnish GDP, whereas a decade earlier it had not exceeded \$4 billion and 1.46%. Most of this increase, however, is not tied to the war in Ukraine, but rather to the need to honor two major contracts: the purchase of 64 F-35s and that of four modern multi-mission corvettes, both finalized in 2021 and linked to modernization programs launched during the 2010s. This increase is expected to continue and could reach 3.3% in 2032.<sup>28</sup> While there are questions about the economic sustainability of such an increase, the principle of it appears to enjoy broad political consensus.<sup>29</sup>

This increase feeds a military model specialized in territorial defense that manages to combine a good level of preparedness and substantial force generation in the event of mobilization with a relatively modest cost, while having suffered less than others from the peace dividend—see *infra*. The country’s military preparedness nevertheless rests on a large number of elements—outside the military budget—that touch most aspects, even mundane ones, of daily life.

Finland thus has autonomy in food and emergency consumer goods, ensured by the National Emergency Supply Agency (*Huoltovarmuuskeskus* or NESAS<sup>30</sup>). It is responsible for building up and maintaining stocks of food,

28. G. O’Dwyer, “Finland Eyes Defense-spending Boost Well Past NATO Mark”, *Defense News*, December 27, 2024, available at: [www.defensenews.com](http://www.defensenews.com).

29. M. Sariola *et al.*, “How Would Higher Defence Spending Affect Finland’s Economic Growth?”, *Bank of Finland Bulletin*, June 30, 2025, available at: [www.bofbulletin.fi](http://www.bofbulletin.fi); interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

30. See the NESAS website: [www.huoltovarmuuskeskus.fi](http://www.huoltovarmuuskeskus.fi).

hydrocarbons, and basic necessities. In the event of a crisis, it does not have the staff to organize distribution itself, but this is planned in close cooperation with companies, which are tasked with applying rationing by limiting daily purchases per individual. Private companies are likewise required to build up more than a month's worth of stocks, in particular of imported products such as medicines.<sup>31</sup> Tasked above all with coordinating the whole and managing certain strategic stocks, NESÄ has only about a hundred employees, underscoring the high degree of decentralization of the system. After the implementation of sanctions against Russia, Finland invested in its food infrastructure to ensure a minimum production of a number of products compatible with the Finnish climate: milk, fish, meat (reindeer, in particular), or cereals such as oats, of which Finland is a very large consumer. With only 7% of arable land, the country should be able to have several months of autonomy in the event of a crisis with the introduction of rationing.<sup>32</sup>

Finland also has a network<sup>33</sup> of more than 50,000 hardened shelters, including 5,500 in Helsinki (900,000 theoretical spaces), reputed to be capable of accommodating the entire Finnish population and even the foreigners present on national territory. While an inspection and oversight agency exists,<sup>34</sup> 85% of these shelters are private, with the law requiring developers and builders to incorporate a shelter of a defined size—1 or 2% of the total area—in every residential or work building larger than 1,200 m<sup>2</sup>. More than 500 shelters are thus built each year, with the costs then shared among the co-owners or the company in charge of the building. This omnipresence of shelters helps keep the possibility of a conflict, and the right reflexes to adopt, in the minds of Finnish citizens, all the more so as some of these shelters are used for other purposes in peacetime but must be ready in less than 72 hours.

This possibility of a conflict is also made tangible for every citizen through significant public communication on the need to be ready. A guide for assembling a “72-hour kit” was thus launched in 2022,<sup>35</sup> including even a precise and inclusive nutrition guide.<sup>36</sup> While Finland is confident in its ability to sustain an emergency regime, this kit is designed for the first hours, to allow that regime to be put in place. A survey conducted in September 2024 indicated that nearly 60% of Finns had acquired or

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31. R. Milne, “War with Russia? Finland Has a Plan for That”, *Financial Times*, March 28, 2022, available at: [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com).

32. J.-B. François, “Aux portes de l’OTAN, la Finlande vise l’autosuffisance alimentaire”, *La Croix*, May 12, 2022, available at: [www.la-croix.com](http://www.la-croix.com).

33. See the website of the Rescue Services of the Finnish Ministry of the Interior: <https://pelastustoimi.fi>.

34. I. Pasi, “Not Only Strong Walls and Structures”, Finnish Ministry of the Interior, December 20, 2023, available at: <https://valtioneuvosto.fi>.

35. “Preparing for Disruptions and Crises”, Suomi, available at: [www.suomi.fi](http://www.suomi.fi)

36. See the website of the Rescue Services of the Finnish Ministry of the Interior: <https://pelastustoimi.fi>.

prepared a similar kit. This figure rises to 75% for rural residents but holds at around 50% for urban dwellers.<sup>37</sup>

The Finnish total-defense model thus seeks to maximize the survival chances of the entire population, which remains small. The state's lack of resources is offset by a good level of individual preparedness but also by a close public-private cooperation, that has been in place long enough to be fluid and natural.

In light of these various elements, Finnish strategic culture and the idea of total defense can be understood through three interdependent pillars:

- the ideal that Finland and its way of life are worth defending, and that a defeat at the hands of Russia would entail an immense loss that justifies submitting to the mechanisms of conscription and reserve;
- to this end, its territory and its population must be protected in their entirety, implying the need to mobilize all Finnish citizens;
- this must be done through the prism of small-state realism in the face of a far more powerful potential adversary, by maximizing thorough but quiet preparation.

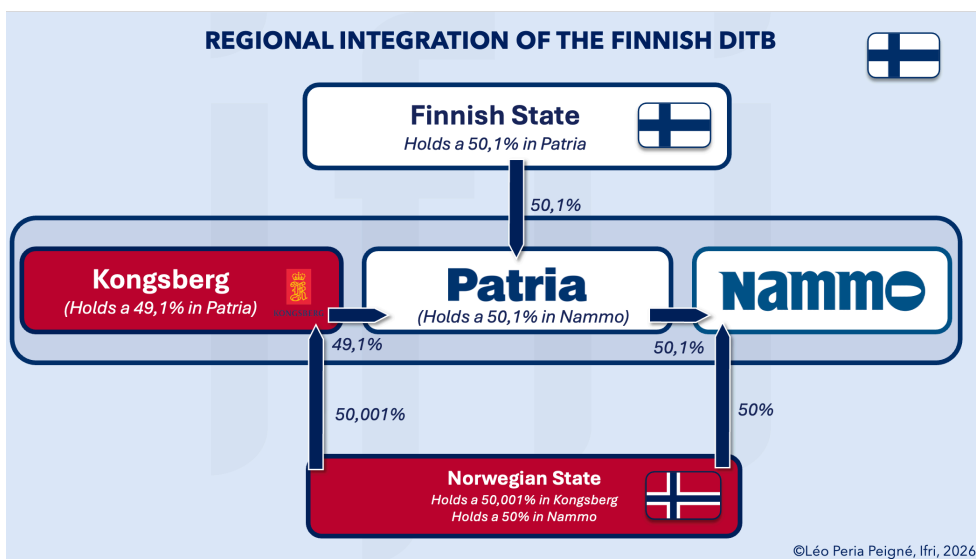
## The Finnish DTIB: a key player in European rearmament

The Finnish defense industry is the heir to a long tradition of strategic autonomy established as early as 1919, in the aftermath of the country's independence. From the outset, the products of the national defense technological and industrial base (DTIB) focused on the needs of the local armed forces, oriented for the most part toward land military equipment. Several companies stood out throughout the second half of the 20th century, such as Vammis (artillery), Lapua (small-caliber weapons), and Sisu (armored vehicles). A small aeronautical industrial core was developed during the interwar period before being gradually marginalized.

Yet it was a company with an aeronautical vocation that gradually became the central player in the Finnish DTIB. Established in 1921 by the Finnish air force, Patria developed a number of aircraft models up to 1995, with the Valmet L-90, and then produced mainly foreign models under license (Fouga Magister French, F/A-18 Hornet American), or specialized components.

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37. "New Guide Instructs People How to Prepare for Incidents and Crises in Finland", Finnish Ministry of the Interior, November 18, 2024, available at: <https://intermin.fi>.

**Figure I-4: The Regional Integration of the Finnish DTIB**

Source: interviews.

During the 1990s, to cope with the post-Cold War budget cuts, it was Patria that served as the basis for building a consolidated national conglomerate by integrating a growing number of domestic companies from various fields. In Sweden, the company Saab followed a similar path. This period of consolidation saw a partial withdrawal of the Finnish state as principal shareholder, but also an interesting dynamic of regionalization of the national DTIB alongside a number of Nordic partners. Patria is thus 50.1% owned by the Finnish state, but also 49.1% by the Norwegian company Kongsberg. The latter is itself 50.001% owned by the Norwegian state, which also owns 50% of the Norwegian ammunition company Nammo.

The creation of Nammo in 1998 also stems from this drive for regionalization and consolidation, which consists of grouping together the various small-caliber ammunition companies. Lapua, which came out of Patria, as well as Norway's Raufoss and Sweden's Celsius, were thus merged within Nammo, a single ammunition entity that is today an important player in Nordic but also European rearmament.

This high level of integration of the major regional companies does not, however, amount to a merger, and Kongsberg, Patria, and Nammo remain distinct entities, all the more so as the proportions of civilian and military activity tend to vary considerably. The Nordic states remain present within the regional DTIB and still hold significant shares in order to guarantee the maintenance of a satisfactory level of sovereignty over their supplies. In the Finnish case, the priority was long the supply of the national forces, with exports constituting only a limited contribution. In the field of systems, moreover, Finnish exports focus as much on the sale of licenses for production abroad as on the sale of finished products. The flagship vehicle of the Finnish land DTIB, Patria's 8x8 AMV infantry vehicle, has thus been

exported in large quantities, notably to Poland and Japan, which chose to produce most of them on their own soil; these two orders together account for more than 2,000 vehicles. A lighter 6x6 armored vehicle, the Pasi has also enjoyed considerable success after 2022 and could become one of the most common armored vehicles in Europe.<sup>38</sup>

The naval domain remained on the margins of the concentration of defense activities around Patria. Limited before the Second World War, the naval industry developed after 1945 in order to settle the war reparations demanded by Moscow in the form of civilian and military vessels. Several dozen shipyards of varying sizes were thus created along the entire southern coast of the country. After the reparations were fully paid, these yards gradually specialized in cruise ships, ferries, cargo ships, and small coastal vessels for export, with particular expertise in ice-resistant hulls. After a period of concentration during the 1990s, public and private investment made it possible to develop this expertise toward higher-performance solutions: in 2018, 60% of the icebreakers in service were of Finnish origin.<sup>39</sup>

The production of military vessels has never been the preserve of a single entity and represents a marginal activity for the Finnish naval industry. The four future Finnish multi-mission corvettes will, however, be produced by a single yard, Rauma Marine Constructions, partly owned by the national investment fund. In December 2025, this same yard, moreover, won an American order for two icebreakers destined for the United States Coast Guard (USCG), a symbol of the international standing of Finnish expertise in this area.<sup>40</sup>

The Finnish defense industry also has a set of smaller companies with specific expertise inherited from Finnish history or its strategic situation, such as Forcit Defence, a subsidiary of the Forcit group. It is known in particular for its naval mines, a field of activity that has become rare in Europe but that Finland has never ceased to develop and modernize. Initially specialized in the satellite detection of drifting sea ice, a common problem in the Baltic Sea, ICEYE has developed since 2014 in the production of observation micro-satellites, with a first launch in 2018. It was notably ICEYE that supplied the first Ukrainian radar-imaging satellite, acquired in August 2022 *via* crowdfunding by the Sergey Prytula Foundation.<sup>41</sup>

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38. “Germany Orders 228 Patria 6x6 APCs for €747M First Step Toward 4,000 Vehicles by 2035”, Defense Express, December 22, 2025.

39. “Peer Review of the Finnish Shipbuilding Industry”, *Reviews of Shipbuilding Economies*, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024.

40. “Coast Guard Awards Contracts to Build Arctic Security Cutters”, Department of Homeland Security, December 29, 2025.

41. “People’s Satellite”, Sergey Prytula Foundation, available at: <https://prytulafoundation.org>.

# A military model between the Cold War and the 21<sup>st</sup> century

Very limited in size, lacking any significant overseas deployments, and equipped with conventional or even aging hardware, the Finnish armed forces are not especially impressive at first glance. They nonetheless represent a reservoir of skills and capabilities that have become very rare in Europe, drawing the attention of a growing number of partners,<sup>42</sup> eager to learn from a force that has never abandoned the prospect of a conflict with Russia as its primary scenario for a major engagement.

## Land forces: conscription, reserve, and training

The Finnish total defense model has preserved a modern and inclusive conscription system capable of generating a respectable land force given the country's limited population. Moreover, the relative aging of the equipment should be offset by the opening of a major modernization phase from the end of the 2020s onward. Re-equipped and integrated into NATO, the Finnish land force remains a partner particularly well-suited to its terrain to confront possible Russian aggression.

### *Specific features and dynamics*

Capability Outlook In 2024, the Finnish Army (*Suomen maavoimat*) consisted of only 4,400 professional soldiers. By comparison, the Portuguese army of a country of similar size had twice as many at the same time. This hard core of professionals frames a rotating service of more than 20,000 conscripts per year, themselves distributed across the entire Finnish land force.

In capability terms, it should undergo major modernization programs from 2030 onward, the Navy and then the Air Force having successively benefited from the priority of the defense and budgetary effort since 2010. It stands out for the importance it places on artillery and has the largest fleet of towed guns in Europe, split between 474 122-millimeter (mm) guns and 24 152 mm guns, all inherited from the Soviet period, to which are added 132 155 mm guns of local design. An unknown but significant proportion of the Soviet-caliber pieces has been transferred to Ukraine as

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42. Tweet from the @DefenceFinland account, November 20, 2025, available at: [x.com/DefenceFinland](https://x.com/DefenceFinland).

part of Helsinki's support to Kyiv. This fleet constituted a reserve dedicated mainly to arming conscript batteries in the event of a major crisis and is the subject of particular attention. Numerous withdrawals have nonetheless been carried out over the past decade owing to the advanced age of the oldest pieces. More than 700 additional pieces are expected to be withdrawn from inventories over the next decade, generating a significant replenishment requirement before 2035 to sustain the Finnish mobilization model. The state of munitions stocks, however, remains unknown.

Self-propelled artillery is far more limited, between a remnant of 74 122 mm 2S1s—partly transferred to Ukraine—and a more modern (though second-hand) fleet of 48 South Korean 155 mm K9s acquired in 2017. This fleet is set to double with the acquisition of 48 additional units announced in 2022. After Norway and Estonia, the club of users of the Korean K9 expanded to Romania in 2024. This fleet could see a further expansion with the replacement of casemated coastal artillery by new self-propelled howitzers, favoring mobility over armor.<sup>43</sup> While the CAESAR was mentioned, local industry unveiled in March 2025 a very similar new howitzer model, Patria's ARVE 155.<sup>44</sup> While coastal defense is provided by the Finnish Navy and not the land force, this component would probably be placed under the latter's command in the event of a conflict.<sup>45</sup>

Rocket artillery, for its part, relies on a fleet of 34 RM-70 launchers of Czech origin purchased in East Germany. This evolved version of the BM-21 *Grad* of Soviet origin is used at the brigade level for saturation strikes out to about forty kilometers. The higher echelons have 41 second-hand M270s, similar to the French LRU, acquired from the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United States. Modernized in 2023, they should be capable of using the latest generations of extended-range rockets and of striking beyond 150 km, thereby expanding Finnish deep-strike capabilities.<sup>46</sup> The replacement of the RM-70s is being considered, but the process has not yet been launched for lack of resources.<sup>47</sup> Here again, Korean products such as the K239 *Chunmoo* could take a privileged place in the event of a tender, while Estonia has just announced the purchase of an undetermined number of launchers and Poland has ordered nearly 300.<sup>48</sup>

The Finnish infantry armored vehicle fleet also stands out for its duality, combining around a hundred BMP-2s of Soviet origin acquired at

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43. F. Wolf, "The Finnish Navy Launches a Call for Tenders for the French Caesar", MetaDefense, June 10, 2024, available at: <https://meta-defense.fr>.

44. R. Häggblom, "Patria Showcases New Self-Propelled 155 mm Artillery for Finnish Navy Coastal Defence", *Naval News*, March 22, 2025, available at: [www.navalnews.com](http://www.navalnews.com).

45. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

46. L. Höllner, "US Approves \$395 Million Upgrade of Finland's M270 Rocket Launchers", *Defense News*, August 4, 2023, available at: [www.defensenews.com](http://www.defensenews.com).

47. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

48. L. Lagneau, "L'Estonie a l'intention de commander des lance-roquettes multiples sud-coréens K239 Chunmoo", *Opex 360*, October 24, 2025, available at: [www.opex360.com](http://www.opex360.com).

the end of the Cold War with an equivalent number of Swedish CV-90s acquired in 2003. Valued for their simplicity and robustness in a demanding Finnish environment, the Finnish BMP-2s were modernized in 2018,<sup>49</sup> but they are nonetheless reaching the end of their operational life and will have to be replaced before 2035. Interviews suggest that a new purchase of CV90s would be the most likely, with a possible substantial increase in the fleet. This choice is explained by the logic of regional interoperability and continuity that weighs heavily in Finnish decisions, to the detriment of other platforms such as Rheinmetall's *Lynx*.

Another emblematic legacy of exchanges with the USSR, the Finnish army has more than 300 amphibious tracked armored vehicles, MT-LBs, also considered well-suited to an environment rich in lakes and rivers. Their replacement has long been considered problematic, for lack of a real successor on the market until the introduction of the Patria TRACKX in 2024.<sup>50</sup> A small, low-profile tracked vehicle of about ten tons capable of transporting ten soldiers, it could prove highly relevant for replacing the MT-LBs but also the American M113s still in service in Europe.

The future of the heavy segment of Finnish land capabilities also remains to be determined. The national tank fleet is split between a first batch of one hundred *Leopard 2A4s* purchased second-hand from Germany in 2004 and a second fleet of one hundred *Leopard 2A6s* purchased from the Netherlands in 2015. They enabled Finland to part with the Soviet tanks that had until then made up most of its order of battle. Several options are available to Helsinki. The modernization of the entire fleet to a more modern standard than that of the *Leopard 2*, a more economical solution, competes with the purchase of new platforms to replace or expand the existing fleet. Rheinmetall has reportedly offered its KF51 *Panther*, pitted against a *Leopard 3* from KNDS Deutschland that is only just beginning its development.<sup>51</sup> While Finland is a satisfied user of the Korean K9 howitzer, the prospect of a purchase of the K2 *Black Panther* cannot be ruled out, thus following the example of the 1,000 units ordered by Poland in 2022. The Korean tank had notably stood out during Norwegian trials in Arctic and subarctic conditions the same year.<sup>52</sup> The Finnish choice should notably take into account issues related to the simplicity of the system, in order to be able to train reservists, but also to weight, in order to match the constraints of the national territory.

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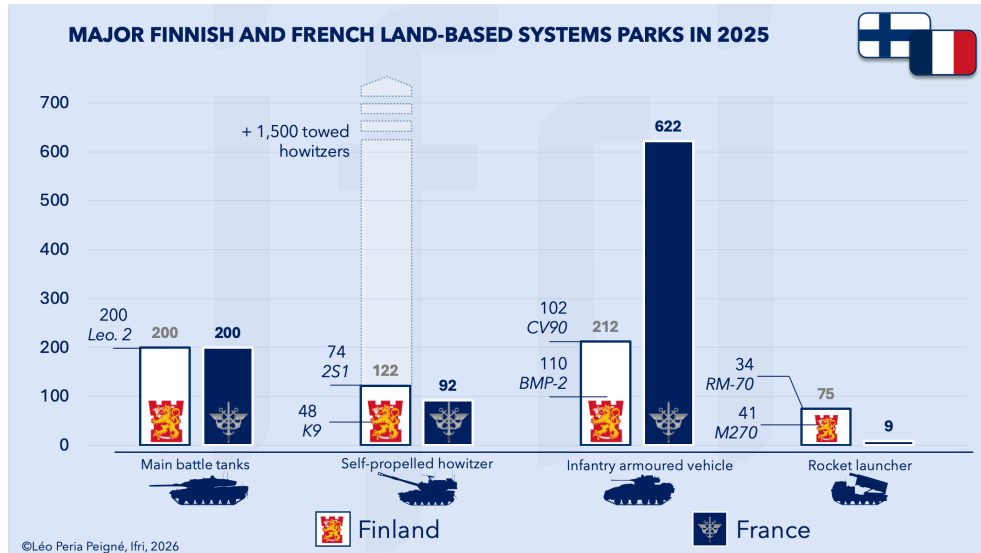
49. "Finland to Get New Guns for BMP-2MD Infantry Fighting Vehicles", *Global Defense News*, February 16, 2018, available at: [www.armyrecognition.com](http://www.armyrecognition.com).

50. R. Ruittenberg, "Finland's Patria Launches Light Tracked APC as Successor to M113", *Defense News*, September 9, 2025, available at: [www.defensenews.com](http://www.defensenews.com).

51. "Finland Eyes New Tanks Despite Buying Leopard 2A6 Just 10 Years Ago Rheinmetall Pushes Unfinished KF51", *Defense Express*, November 19, 2025, available at: <https://en.defence-ua.com>.

52. N. Fiorenza, "Leopard 2A7 and K2 Black Panther Compete to Become Norway's Next BMT", *Janes*, February 2, 2022, available at: [www.janes.com](http://www.janes.com).

**Figure II-1: Major Finnish and French land system fleets in 2025**



Source: *Military Balance*.

On a more micro segment, the Finnish army is also beginning a profound shift in the small-caliber domain by abandoning Soviet calibers (notably 7.62 x 39 and 12.7 x 108 mm) to adopt NATO calibers (5.56 x 45 and 12.7 x 99 mm). This important development concerns both the forces and the national defense industry, which produces most of the small-caliber weapons used in the country. Interoperability issues within NATO, but also the overall availability of Soviet munitions in Europe, were the primary motivation for such a change. The acquisition process should extend at least until the mid-2030s, with more than 400,000 weapons to be acquired.<sup>53</sup>

### **Order of battle**

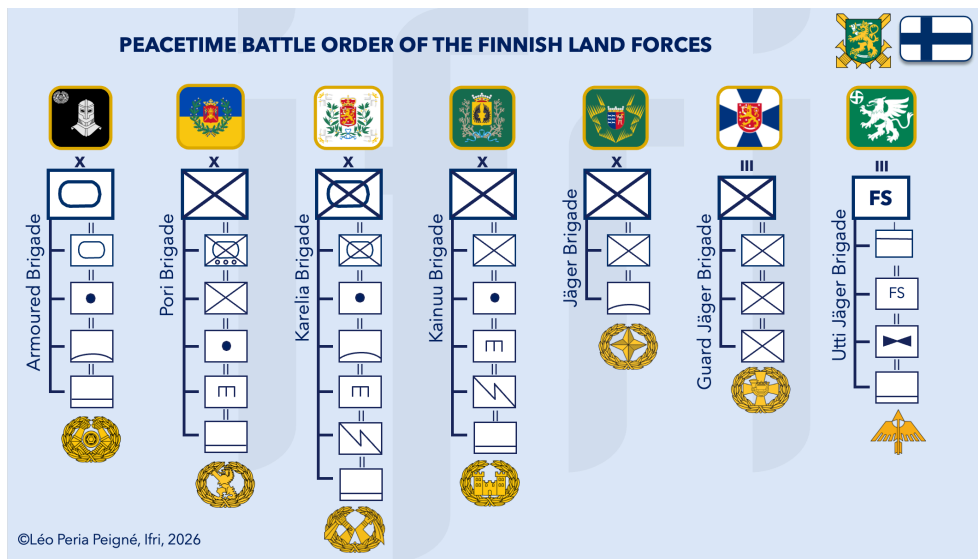
In peacetime, the Finnish order of battle (OOB) relies on five main brigades, a regiment dedicated to the defense of the capital, and a special forces battalion. The National Defense University, often depicted as a brigade, occupies a place apart and essentially fulfills advanced training missions. The various brigades do not constitute a homogeneous whole and must be understood above all as “production lines”. Used on several occasions during the interviews, this term underscores the importance of their training function, transforming citizens into trained reservists.

While the Finnish peacetime order of battle is known, the wartime one is kept confidential and should be radically different. Land manpower would thus be multiplied by nearly twenty in a few weeks, rising from 18,000 (professionals and conscripts) to more than 260,000 troops (professionals, conscripts, and mobilized reservists). To this figure must be

53. “The Finnish Defence Forces to Shift to Using NATO-Standard Calibres for New Small Arms”, Finnish Defence Forces, October 28, 2025, available at: <https://maavoimat.fi>.

added the roughly 16,000 border guards—of whom 12,600 would be mobilized—who would pass from the authority of the Ministry of the Interior to that of the Ministry of Defense. While it is impossible to establish precisely for lack of available data, the wartime OOB should be able to count notably on three army corps composed of about ten light infantry brigades, two mechanized brigades, and two armored regiments, supported by an artillery brigade and significant logistics, anti-aircraft, and signals units.<sup>54</sup>

**Figure II-2: Battle order of the Finnish land force in peacetime**



Sources: Interviews, Finnish Armed Forces website, FOI, FIIA.

In the event of mobilization, command and staff numbers should also see a significant increase. Since the data in question are classified, it is only possible to provide a rough estimate, drawn from several interviews.

Limited in numbers, the Finnish officer corps is moreover placed under strain by NATO accession, with Finland being required to provide a significant volume of officers to the *NATO Command Structure*. Owing to its conscription model, the career of Finnish officers is, however, considered slower than in other Alliance countries. At equal rank, a Finnish officer may thus have more seniority than an equivalent in another NATO army. To address this difficulty, the Finnish forces are considering a marginal adaptation of their promotion system by granting temporary ranks to officers sent to NATO. In the medium term, the objective of the Finnish Ministry of Defense would also be to assert the specificity of the Finnish model so as to allow lower-ranking officers with relevant experience to fill the posts in question.<sup>55</sup>

54. K. Pallin *et al.*, “Western Military Capability in Northern Europe 2023. Part 1: National Capabilities”, Swedish Defense Research Agency, No. 5527-SE, March 2024.

55. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

### Trends in senior command and staff numbers of the Finnish armed forces in the event of mobilization

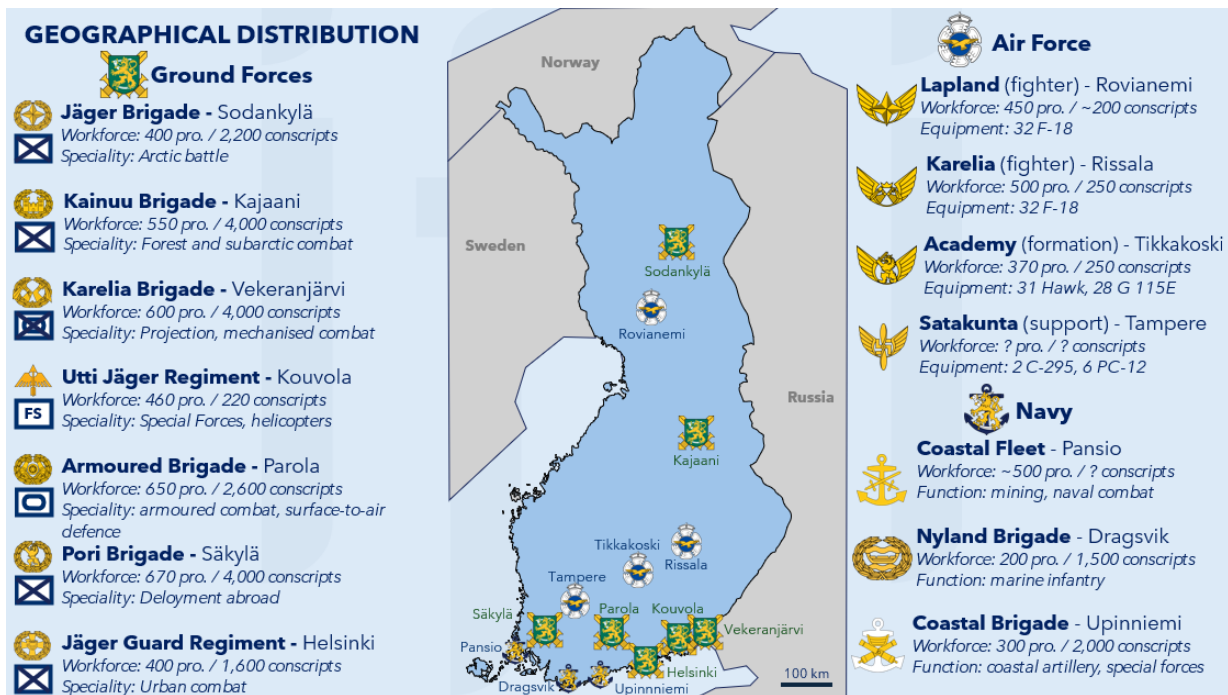
Grade	Peacetime numbers (estimated)	Wartime numbers (estimated)
Generals (2-5 stars)	30	45
Colonels	100	500
Lieutenant colonels	500	2,500
Commanders	500	2,500
Other officers	1,500-2,000	16,000 – 20,000

Sources: Interviews.

The operational core of the Finnish land forces is thus centered on the three brigades named Kainuu, Pori, and Karelia, considered the most important in terms of manpower, capabilities, and readiness. They each have nearly 4,000 conscripts on an annual basis, while the other units have between 220 and 2,200. The Kainuu Brigade (Kajaani), responsible for the defense of the center of the country, specializes in subarctic forest combat. The Pori Brigade (Säkylä) was at one time conceived as the Finnish unit intended for overseas deployments and peacekeeping operations, with a larger number of professional soldiers than the others. With the renewed tension toward Russia, its function nonetheless appears to be refocusing on rapid response to a move by Moscow on the national territory. Positioned right on the Russo-Finnish border, the Karelia Brigade (Vekaranjärvi) is dedicated to mechanized combat and must be able to oppose any Russian intrusion.

More modest in its format, the Jäger Brigade (Sodankylä) is positioned in the north of the country and constitutes the main unit specialized in Arctic combat. It is moreover in high demand to share this specific know-how with the new NATO allies. North of Helsinki, the Armored Brigade (Parola) handles most of the training around armored combat, but also ground-to-air defense. Finally, the Guard Jäger Regiment, concentrated around the capital, is responsible for its defense and for specialization in urban combat, the protection of institutions, and the Presidential Guard, while the Utti Jäger Regiment (Kouvola) brings together the Finnish special and air-mobile forces.

**Figure II-3: Territorial distribution of the Finnish forces**



Sources: Interviews, Finnish Armed Forces website.

## ***An effective and sustainable conscription model***

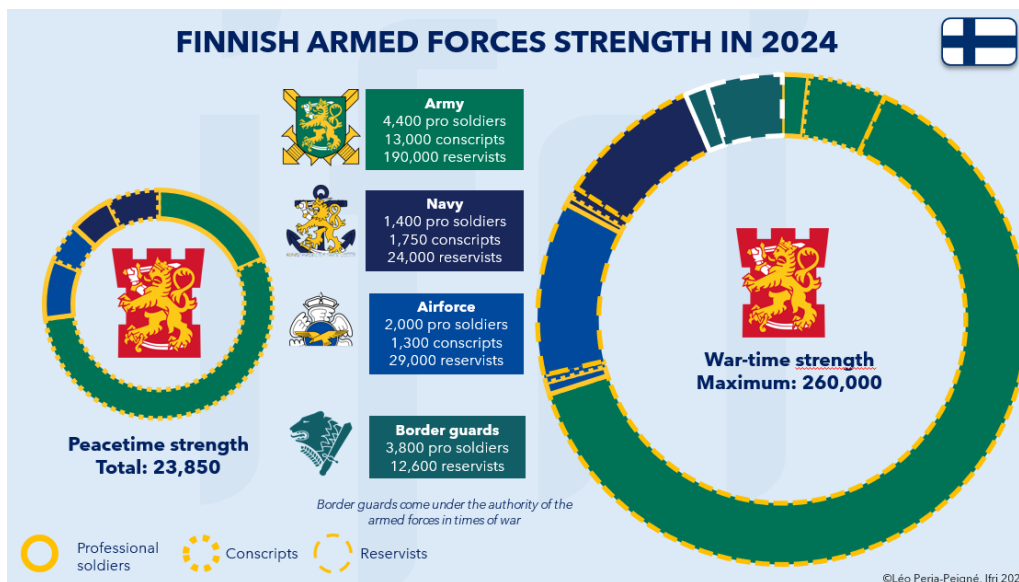
### **A modern conscription system**

Article 127 of the Finnish Constitution states that every Finnish citizen is required to participate in or contribute to the defense of the homeland.<sup>56</sup> To this end, every male Finnish citizen between 18 and 50 years of age—for enlisted personnel—or 60—for officers and non-commissioned officers—is required to perform compulsory military service and then to be transferred into a reserve of more than 900,000 citizens. This should exceed one million with the passage of a law proposed in May 2025, raising the maximum age of reservists to 65. Enlisted personnel must thus be able to serve until age 65, while the age criterion for officers and non-commissioned officers is simply removed in favor of physical fitness to serve.<sup>57</sup>

56. Opinion No. 420/2007, “Constitution of Finland”, European Commission for Democracy through Law, September 5, 2007.

57. Government Proposal HE 75/2025 vp, Finnish Parliament, August 29, 2025, available at: [www.eduskunta.fi](http://www.eduskunta.fi).

**Figure II-4: Numbers of the Finnish armed forces in 2024**



Sources: *Military Balance*, interviews.

With a number of reservists three to four times greater than the wartime size of the armed forces—around 285,000—the Finnish system has a very significant depth of human resources, which gives it great resilience to losses but also a certain flexibility. The Finnish model thus relies on an increasing mobilization in four tiers, proportional to the severity of the crisis, ranging from a simple occasional need to support the authorities (natural disaster) to the maximum level linked to an infringement of Finnish territorial integrity.

In its 2024 model, the Finnish army counts on a maximum format of 260,000 mobilized if needed, drawn from a reserve of more than 900,000 already-trained reservists. Despite a stockpiling culture little altered by the peace dividend, its capacity to equip more than the 260,000 planned troops remains uncertain.<sup>58</sup> The Finnish forces thus have a reserve for mobilization and significant skills in the event of losses, but also to offset the proportion of reservist citizens who cannot be mobilized because they hold strategic functions.

After being summoned during the year he turns 18, the Finnish citizen is offered three distinct choices:

A conventional military service of 165 days (enlisted, 43%), 255 days (specialists: 14%) or 347 days (non-commissioned officers and officers:

58. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

43%<sup>59</sup>). This path concerns more than 80% of conscripts, who are then transferred into the military reserve.

- An “unarmed” military service, intended for citizens wishing to serve in the armed forces without directly bearing arms, for possible religious convictions. Very marginal, it reportedly concerns only a few dozen individuals per year. They are then transferred into the conventional military reserve.
- A civilian service of 347 days for those who do not wish to serve in the armed forces. It can be carried out in various sectors of civil society, such as health services, environmental protection, or various non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They are then transferred into a separate civilian reserve.

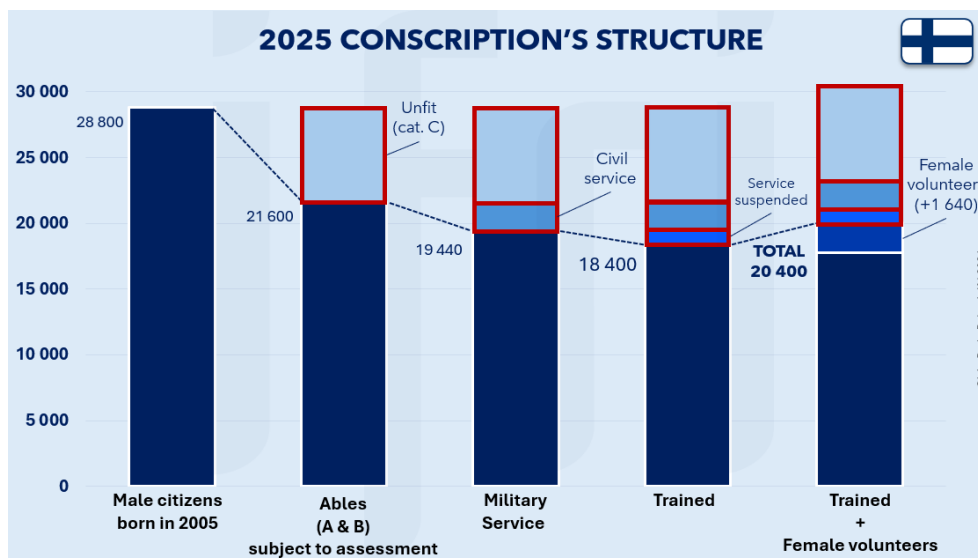
Women can carry out one of these options between 18 and 29 years of age on a voluntary basis, but with the same requirements. They then have access to all branches and specialties without distinction of gender.<sup>60</sup>

Mobilization and distribution into arms, branches, and units are mostly done on a regional basis, with conscripts assigned to units close to their home. It is nonetheless possible to express preferences to perform one’s military service in a particular specialty or unit, notably for linguistic reasons: the Nyland Brigade is thus dedicated to Swedish-speaking Finns. Conscripts are then assessed and divided into three fitness categories: fit (A), fit under conditions (B), and exempted (C). They notably take an endurance test at the beginning and end of military service—a 12-minute run to cover as much distance as possible—which also serves as a national assessment of a generation’s physical fitness. The gradual increase in the number of those exempted for physical or psychological problems is a source of concern, with 25% of those assessed having been deemed unfit for service in peacetime in 2025. The extension of the reservists’ age was thus motivated by the fact that a significant share of the Finnish population is aging in better health, but also by the growing number of unfit conscripts.

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59. See the “Finland” page of the European Bureau for Conscientious Objection, available at: <https://ebco-beoc.org>.

60. “Voluntary Military Service for Women”, INTTI, available at: [intti.fi](https://intti.fi).

**Figure II-5: Structure of conscription 2025**

Source: Finnish armed forces website, interviews.

Of the 28,800 citizens called up in 2025, 21,600 were deemed fit, and only 19,400 opted for military service. 18,400 ultimately completed their training, and the target of 20,000 trained reservists was reached only thanks to the contribution of the 1,640 female volunteers. At the end of 2022, more than 12,000 women were reservists.<sup>61</sup> The question of extending military obligations to all citizens is still little discussed, but some interviews suggest that it could be one of the only viable avenues for providing an effective systemic response to the demographic decline and the growing number of unfit individuals.<sup>62</sup> These two factors had, moreover, been identified during the parliamentary work of a parliamentary commission dedicated to conscription issues launched in 2021, before the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>63</sup> Developments on the question in Ukraine are, moreover, particularly scrutinized in Finland by proponents of generalizing military service. Since the service must be performed before age thirty, the data relating to the 1994 cohort are now available and show mixed results, with nearly 40% exempted.<sup>64</sup>

### **Service organization**

The Finnish conscription model, conceived as a veritable production line of trained reservists, has the particular feature of putting ordinary soldiers, non-commissioned officers, and officers through the same common process.

61. "Military Service Is Changing—Out of Necessity or for the Sake of Equality?", Mighty Finland, August 24, 2023, available at: [www.mightyfinland.fi](http://www.mightyfinland.fi).

62. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

63. "Development of conscription service", Finnish Ministry of Defense, available at: <https://defmin.fi>.

64. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

The standard six-month military service (165 days) is segmented into four six-week periods: initial training, specialty training, then complementary training and unit training. Certain specialties in high demand—military police, doctors, and heavy-vehicle drivers in particular—perform an intermediate service of 255 days, spending the last three months serving in a unit. The selected conscripts begin the six weeks of the first part of non-commissioned officer training upon completing specialty training. Future non-commissioned officers and officers are then separated. The former continue their training for six weeks before returning to their unit, where they supervise a new cycle of conscripts. The latter, for their part, undergo fourteen weeks of specific training, part of which takes place in a unit where they notably supervise the complementary training and unit training of conscripts.<sup>65</sup> The Finnish system thus manages to sustain itself remarkably well, with the most advanced conscripts contributing directly to the training of newcomers, with a permanent rotation between the two annual 165-day sessions.<sup>66</sup>

All professional soldiers are also transferred into the reserve upon retirement, if their age and physical condition permit. It is difficult to estimate the rank distribution of this “reservist industry”, but interviews offered a glimpse of a structure composed of 75% enlisted personnel framed by 20 to 22% non-commissioned officers and a restricted officer corps of 3 to 5% in the land forces, a proportion lower than NATO standards.<sup>67</sup>

The cohesion of the forces is all the more reinforced in that the Finnish forces seek to preserve as much as possible the composition of the companies and combat groups formed during the first stages of military service, which endures during the refresher courses and exercises that punctuate the active life of reservists. The digitization of the late 1990s made it possible to systematize this intention, further facilitated by the creation of a unique digital identity number. This development notably allows for precise tracking of each citizen’s career and of the skills acquired in the civilian world that may be of interest to the armed forces in the event of a crisis.

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65. “Conscription – A Finnish Choice”, Finnish Defense Forces, available at: <https://puolustusvoimat.fi>.

66. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

67. *Ibid.*

**Figure II-6: Structure of Finnish military service**

Source: Finnish armed forces website, interviews.

In the event of war, this organization would be profoundly disrupted, with most of the cadres being redirected toward combat units. Training should nonetheless continue within reduced peacetime units manned by a larger proportion of reservists in order to maintain the flow of trained recruits. Priority could, however, be given to the accelerated refresher training of these reservists to improve the overall training level of combat units.<sup>68</sup>

### **Reserve and refresher training**

Once their service is completed, reservists are required to carry out regular “refresher” periods. In 2024, more than 25,000 reservists had completed their refresher period. While this figure remains stable over the year, it underscores the difficulty of maintaining know-how over time for a reserve reaching one million. Reservists can thus be called up for a refresher period, which is, however, limited by a maximum defined according to rank. Enlisted reservists cannot be called up for more than 80 days—150 for specialists—over their entire reserve period between the end of their service and the age limit. Officers and non-commissioned officers can be called up for up to 200 days of compulsory refresher training.<sup>69</sup> Voluntary and optional training is not counted within these limits.

The organization of this voluntary training is provided by a specific entity, the Finnish National Defense Training Association, or *Maanpuolustuskoulutusyhdistys* (MPK), created in 1993.<sup>70</sup> It brings

68. *Ibid.*

69. “Conscription— A Finnish Choice”, *op. cit.*

70. Website of the Finnish National Defense Training Association: <https://mpk.fi>.

together a large number of reservist associations from different fields or specialties, such as the Guild of the Nyland Brigade<sup>71</sup> or the Reserve Officers' Association.<sup>72</sup> Recognized as being of public utility, the MPK has been delegated by the State the coordinated organization of training, instruction, and the monitoring of military preparedness according to a precise schedule<sup>73</sup> throughout the country. It cooperates closely with the armed forces, which provide a certain number of directives according to their local needs. These same associations also contribute to the organization of major military exercises, further underscoring the close link between civil society and the military world in Finland. Most of the training is provided by the reservists themselves, subject to validation by the MPK, which thus distinguishes between active and passive reservists. As an association, it plays a central role in the Finnish model while having only limited human resources, fewer than a hundred full-time equivalents, but supplemented by a large number of volunteers.

Compulsory refresher sessions make it possible to regularly gather companies as a whole, with reservists receiving financial compensation from the State. Apart from a few specific areas in high demand, training on a voluntary basis receives more limited compensation and may be subject to the employer's approval. Participation in certain optional or specialized refresher sessions may even be paid for out of pocket.

Generally speaking, the Finnish system is striking for its ability to operate in a decentralized manner, relying largely on the goodwill of the most committed reservists. The stated objective of the system, according to the interviews conducted, remains to operate "by combining maximum military effectiveness with minimal financial costs for public authorities". Participation in the reserve is an obligation, but the relative freedom left to conscripts and reservists in terms of specialization, as well as the career opportunities, makes it possible to create and maintain a minimum level of motivation indispensable to the functioning of such a decentralized system.

The effectiveness of this system is considered strong and has a limited rate of voluntary avoidance (excluding medical discharge). Conscientious objection has been recognized since 1931, but the various alternatives offered (civilian service, unarmed military service) make it possible to limit recourse to it. It is even possible in theory to switch to a civilian service from a military service while performing the latter. Likewise, a conscript who has completed military service can request to perform an additional three-day civilian service in order to move from the military

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71. Uusimaa Brigade Guild: [www.nylandsbrigadsgille.fi](http://www.nylandsbrigadsgille.fi).

72. Finnish Reserve Officers' Association: [www.rul.fi](http://www.rul.fi).

73. "Training Calendar", Finnish National Defense Training Association, available at: <https://koulutuskalenteri.mpk.fi>.

reserve to the civilian reserve.<sup>74</sup> This opportunity experienced an unusual influx of requests after the start of the conflict in Ukraine, offset by a reverse influx toward the MPK's voluntary military training.

“Total” conscientious objectors (*totaalikieltäytyminen*) who refuse even these alternatives remain few in number, all the more so as obtaining a medical exemption, notably for an allergy, is fairly simple. The real figure remains unknown, but the interviews conducted estimate it at fewer than 200, or even fewer than 100 in some years, out of more than 20,000 conscripts. The penalty theoretically incurred is six months in prison; in reality, it is most often commuted to house arrest with an electronic ankle bracelet. It does not, however, constitute a formalized civil disability. By comparison, evading the French defense-and-citizenship day can be an obstacle to obtaining a driver's license.

A 2022 poll indicated that more than 80% of respondents were prepared to fight in the event of a conflict, including without the prospect of assured victory. This result, obtained a few weeks after the start of the war in Ukraine, is the highest since these surveys began in 1976.<sup>75</sup> In 2024, the figures were still 78%.

It is, however, surprising to note that the effectiveness of the Finnish system and its low avoidance rate are achieved with limited engagement and visibility of the armed forces *vis-à-vis* society. Military service there is perceived as a stage to be gone through and regarded with more indifference than support or rejection. For their part, the Finnish forces do little communication, and what there is is little centralized, relying on strong local initiative by units. Presentations in schools and high schools exist, but on a voluntary basis, and are in no way systematic, while the presence of military, or even strategic, questions is perceived by the interviews as limited. Training sequences of a few days exist for young people over 16, provided by the MPK,<sup>76</sup> but it is difficult to estimate their real effectiveness beyond the students already drawn to these questions. It should be noted, however, that the various MPK and armed forces websites dedicated to information on military service, the reserve, or training are of high quality and available in Finnish, Swedish, and English.

The interviews conducted as part of this study did not make it possible to identify salient factors, with a commonly received answer being of a physiological nature: “it's in our DNA”.<sup>77</sup> It is therefore difficult to identify the keys that would make it possible to replicate or imitate the

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74. “Replacement Service”, Siviilipalveluskeskus, available at: <https://siviilipalveluskeskus.fi>.

75. “Defence information”, *Bulletins and Reports*, Finnish Ministry of Defense, December 2024.

76. “Courses for Young People”, Finnish National Defense Training Association, available at: <https://mpk.fi>.

77. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

Finnish model. The following avenues should nonetheless help in grasping its strength, but also its specificity, making it difficult to replicate exactly for a country that does not have these dynamics:

- ▀ a clear and shared identification of the Russian threat within society, reinforced by the conflict in Ukraine but present for more than a century, giving strong historical legitimacy to the defense model adopted;
- ▀ a politico-historical culture of compromise inherited from past conflicts, notably the Winter and Continuation wars,<sup>78</sup> but perhaps also from the Finnish civil war;
- ▀ the inclusiveness of the model, allowing the vast majority to find the modality that suits them to contribute to an overall national defense effort.

## A limited but transforming Navy

Dependent on maritime trade for more than 90% of its commercial traffic, Finland has only a limited fleet but one particularly suited to a constraining Baltic Sea. It has thus preserved significant mining capabilities and a tradition of fast attack craft, although the recent acquisition of modern, larger-tonnage units suggests a possible radical evolution of its culture.

### *Specific features and dynamics*

With more than 1,200 kilometers of coastline and 95% of its commercial traffic passing by sea due to a lack of infrastructure in the north, Finland places particular importance on naval issues for its defense and survival. While its total defense culture allows it to envisage a temporary disruption of its maritime lines of communication, Finland considers that it must avoid any lasting interruption, on pain of finding itself in great difficulty, the northern land route representing less than 10% of the overall volume.<sup>79</sup> The Finnish Navy (*Suomen merivoimat*) thus plays a major role in the defense of the country. It nonetheless remains a limited force, comprising some 1,400 professionals—of whom more than a thousand are officers and non-commissioned officers—who train more than 4,000 conscripts per year. While its wartime size is to grow by nearly 30,000 reservists, it remains the least-resourced branch of the Finnish forces for fulfilling a large number of missions.

78. T. Sahrakorpi, “Cultural Memory and the Finnish Civil War”, *Doing History in Public*, August 12, 2025, available at: <https://doinghistoryinpublic.org>.

79. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

To the classic missions of interdiction, protection of the maritime approaches, and naval lines of communication has recently been added that of protecting underwater infrastructure, a particularly sensitive subject in the Baltic Sea.<sup>80</sup> Most of the submarine cables connecting Finland to the rest of the world thus converge off Helsinki in the middle of the Gulf of Finland, with any damage capable of causing lasting consequences.<sup>81</sup> The involvement of Chinese ships in the degradation of this infrastructure represents an additional complication in a very busy Baltic Sea.<sup>82</sup> The intrusion of an Indian frigate coming from Russia into an area usually off-limits to foreign military vessels in the Gulf of Bothnia in July 2025 further underscored the role of non-European vessels in the Baltic theater.<sup>83</sup>

Beyond this congestion, the Baltic Sea is a complex environment, combining difficult weather, shallow depth (55 meters on average), a heavily indented archipelagic coastline, and freezing over in winter. Navigation in the Baltic Sea is therefore complex, and combat even more so, imposing particular constraints on the fleets of the coastal countries. To these natural constraints are added those of history, with the 1947 Treaty of Paris considerably limiting Finnish capabilities in terms of tonnage and armament. These limitations have no longer been in force since the end of the Cold War, but they were long an obstacle and an inhibition to the development of a stronger national navy.

This period nonetheless appears to be over, and the Finnish Navy has undergone a significant modernization dynamic from the 2010s onward with the *Squadron 2020* (*Laivue 2020* in Finnish) program.<sup>84</sup> In addition to a number of mid-life refits, this new dynamic is notably launched by the acquisition of four modern multi-mission corvettes of the *Pohjanmaa* class. These ships displace more than 4,000 tons, a volume the Finnish Navy had not seen since the 1940s, whereas its current ships do not exceed 1,500 tons. While the last of these corvettes is expected to be delivered before 2035, seven other much older ships are expected to leave service, resulting in a reduction in size that has not, for the moment, been offset by new orders.

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80. S. Himka, “Baltic Sea Undersea Cable Security”, The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, July 9, 2025, available at: <https://jsis.washington.edu>.

81. “Submarine Cable Map”, *TeleGeography*, available at: [www.submarinemap.com](http://www.submarinemap.com).

82. S. Besch and E. Brown, “A Chinese-Flagged Ship Cut Baltic Sea Internet Cables. This Time, Europe Was More Prepared”, Carnegie Endowment, December 3, 2025, available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

83. “Indian Warship in the Baltic Sea: Signalling Support for Russia”, *Nordic Defence Review*, July 2025, available at: <https://nordicdefencereview.com>.

84. G. Toremans, “The Finnish Navy – ‘Leaner and Meaner’”, *European Security & Defence*, February 14, 2020, available at: <https://euro-sd.com>.

Figure II-7: Order of battle of the Finnish Navy in 2025



Source: *Military Balance*, interviews.

Although unremarkable for larger navies, the capability leap represented by the future *Pohjanmaa* is considerable for the Finnish Navy. They must thus combine specific physical characteristics such as an ice-resistant hull and varied capabilities, from anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles to torpedo tubes, including a helicopter hangar with a complete suite of radar and sonar sensors. This rupture does not come without prompting interesting debates in Finland, including in rather mainstream media. The size of these ships worries some observers, who see it as a major vulnerability against long-range Russian anti-ship effectors, given the inability to hide among the many islands of the coastline. The label “corvette” has, moreover, been contested in favor of that of frigate, which it is by NATO standards in exceeding the 3,000-ton limit.<sup>85</sup> The significant budgetary step required for the acquisition and maintenance of these ships has also raised questions, including from parliamentarians.<sup>86</sup>

The *Pohjanmaa* can nonetheless be perceived as the culmination of a doctrinal reflection begun in the 1990s, with the Finnish Navy considering a ship intended for the protection of maritime commercial lines rather than coastal defense. This mission was, until then, the major capability driver, decisive for most concepts toward light, missile- and torpedo-launching attack craft, used in cooperation with the various mine-warfare ships, the other Finnish specialty (see *infra*). The *Hamina*-class attack craft, commissioned between 1998 and 2006, are a first timid step in this

85. J. Huhtanen, “HS Analysis: The Navy Is Quietly Receiving Larger Combat Ships Than Planned – Why Has The Defence Forces Downplayed The Matter?”, *Helsingin Sanomat*, September 21, 2019, available at: <https://hs.fi>.

86. J. Yrttiaho, “Written Question KK 161/2019 vp”, Finnish Parliament, November 27, 2021, available at: [www.eduskunta.fi](http://www.eduskunta.fi).

direction, slightly larger and better armed than their direct *Rauma*-class predecessors, which are expected to leave service by 2030. The 250-ton *Hamina* were a first stage of a dynamic that could lead the Finnish Navy to consider possible deployments outside the Baltic Sea with its new corvettes/frigates, which open up new avenues of cooperation bilaterally or within NATO. Refitted from 2024, the *Hamina* attack craft should last beyond 2035, but their replacement will be an important marker as to the continuation of the evolution of the Finnish Navy.

This succession could, however, be a long time coming, the *Squadron 2020* program and the purchase of the *Pohjanmaa* having lastingly drained the budgets dedicated to the Navy. In addition, these new units will weigh heavily on the human resources of a limited Finnish Navy, with 70 sailors needed a minima to crew a *Pohjanmaa* against 27 for a *Hamina*.<sup>87</sup>

Beyond its ships, the Finnish Navy also has two specific brigades. A rapid-reaction force transferred from the land force to the Navy at the end of the 1990s, the Nyland Amphibious Brigade specializes in littoral combat. It hosts most of the conscripts from the Swedish-speaking minority, and training there is provided in Swedish, although orders are in Finnish in order to ensure mutual comprehension. Only 20% of the 1,500 conscripts trained each year have Finnish as their mother tongue.<sup>88</sup> While the Nyland Brigade is one of the oldest Finnish units, the Coastal Brigade is one of the most recent, formalized in 2015. It is notably responsible for the training of combat divers and coastal batteries.<sup>89</sup>

### ***Naval mining: a preserved capability undergoing regionalization***

In July 2024, the defense ministers of the countries bordering the Baltic Sea and of Belgium signed a letter of intent to initiate increased cooperation in the field of naval mines. This new initiative aims to develop a common framework for cooperation on the purchase, logistics, and possible employment of naval mines. A capability that has become rare in Europe, the use of mines remains a specialty of the Finnish Navy, with two-thirds of its ships in service dedicated to laying or sweeping mines.

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87. R. Häggblom, “After Hamina, Silence?”, Corporal Frisk, July 27, 2024, available at: <https://corporalfrisk.com>.

88. “Nyland Brigade Trains Versatile Coastal Ranger Troops with High Performance Capability”, Finnish Navy, available at: <https://merivoimat.fi>.

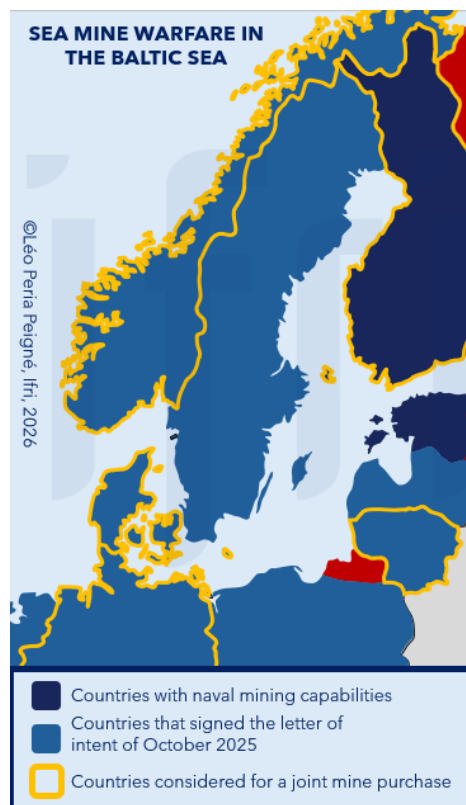
89. “Coastal Defense throughout the Gulf of Finland”, Finnish Navy, available at: <https://merivoimat.fi>.

With a Finnish coastline dotted with more than 75,000 islands and islets of more than 500 m<sup>2</sup> and an incalculable number of shallow, or even very shallow, areas, mining makes it possible to effectively control the approaches while requiring only limited human resources. This specialization today enables Finland to be the pivotal actor of the 2024 initiative, which was enriched in October 2025 with a framework agreement aimed at facilitating joint acquisition and the exchange of information and cooperation between navies on the subject. A first joint acquisition is expected to be carried out between Finland, Denmark, Lithuania, and Norway.<sup>90</sup> A symposium on naval mining had previously been held in Copenhagen in June 2025, bringing together most of the Baltic countries, at the initiative of the Danish Navy.

Such an acquisition would very probably concern the mines of the Finnish company Forcit,<sup>91</sup> which has already equipped the Estonian Navy since 2021<sup>92</sup> and should eventually equip the Danish Navy, which acquired several hundred mines for its patrol vessels in 2025.<sup>93</sup> Forcit claims to have worked in close cooperation with the Finnish Navy in the field of mines for decades and today has two major products:<sup>94</sup>

- ▀ the bottom mine *Blocker*, a high-power influence mine, presented as designed for Baltic temperatures, in service in the Finnish, Estonian, and soon Danish navies;
- ▀ the coastal bottom mine, designed for more limited depths and with a smaller charge.

These two mines rely on a common multi-sensor target detection system that can also be installed on older mines. It is intended to allow the programming of the mine and training in its use, but is also meant to allow



90. "Finland to Lead Naval Mines Cooperation", *Naval News*, October 17, 2025, available at: [www.navalnews.com](http://www.navalnews.com).

91. "Naval Systems", Forcit Defence, available at: <https://forcitdefence.com>.

92. "Estonia Acquires Naval Mines from Finland", *News ERR*, December 23, 2021, available at: <https://news.err.ee>.

93. S. Elezovic, "Danish Defence Looking at Naval Mines with More Than 1000 kg of Explosives—to Be Placed in the Baltic Sea", *Ingeniøren*, July 30, 2024, available at: <https://ing.dk>.

94. "Naval Systems", *op. cit.*

discrimination between allied and enemy ships. Forcit also has a standardized containerized laying device (12 mines, 15 tons, reloadable), which can be installed in two hours on any vessel having a platform capable of accommodating a standard 20-foot container.<sup>95</sup>

This approach should allow the Finnish Navy to maintain significant mining capabilities despite the forthcoming withdrawal from service of its two largest units, the 1,450-ton *Hämeenmaa*-class minelayers, commissioned in the early 1990s (see the infographic above). With only three 680-ton *Pansio*, also commissioned in the 1990s, the future of the Finnish mining capability could thus involve the use of requisitioned civilian vessels in the event of conflict, on which the Forcit devices would be installed, another use of the close links between civilian companies and the armed forces, illustrating the prevalence of the total defense concept. In addition, these various mines can be deployed from a maritime patrol aircraft, a medium helicopter or even from a light aircraft for coastal mines.

The naval mine is thus considered by the Finnish forces as well as by industry as a strategic competence to be preserved, maintained, and developed. Forcit is reportedly working, for its part, on the development of a mine deployable from a standard 533 mm torpedo tube. Owing to its relative simplicity, mining is part of the standard training of Finnish Navy conscripts. It also allows for long-term storage, between 20 and 25 years, depending on the model, and the building of stocks requiring only reduced maintenance, enabling the Finnish Navy to have a presumably large stockpile despite limited financial resources. Maintenance must be carried out every eight years, while a wet mine must be able to remain active for one year before deactivating on its own.

It is difficult to estimate precisely the reality of current prices, but the acquisition of the environment needed to develop such a capability (training, programming and laying devices, etc.) is presented as less than 10 million euros. The price of a *Blocker* mine should be around 500,000 euros—of which 300,000 euros for the coastal mine, the target-identification devices representing a significant proportion of the price.

While the primary purpose of Finnish mining capabilities remains the protection of the national approaches and naval lines of communication, NATO accession makes it possible to envisage more offensive functions. With the intensification of cooperation around mine warfare begun in 2024 adding to the existing links with the Estonian Navy, the prospect of an offensive mining of the Gulf of Finland up to Saint Petersburg cannot be ruled out.<sup>96</sup>

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95. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

96. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

## The Air Force: from the *Hornet* to the *Lightning*

The Finnish air force bases its strategy on the dispersal of its assets across the entire country in order to operate from rudimentary bases that are harder to identify and target. The acquisition of F-35s, complex and sophisticated fighter-bombers, nonetheless seems to be in apparent contradiction with the imperative of ruggedness and simplicity induced by this strategy. The integration of these more demanding new assets is thus one of the major challenges the Finnish air force must address.

### ***Specific features and dynamics***

After a 2010s essentially dedicated to the modernization of its navy, Finland devoted the 2020s to that of its Air Force (*Suomen ilmavoimat*) with the launch of the HX program aimed at replacing its entire fighter fleet. Finland had thus acquired 64 F-18Cs and Ds in 1992, for the most part assembled in Finland in order to replace a mixed fleet of Soviet MiG-21s and Swedish *Draken*. With a final delivery in 2000 and two mid-life refit sessions between 2006 and 2016, the Finnish fleet is expected to leave service by 2030, with a first aircraft having been withdrawn in 2024.<sup>97</sup>

Prepared as early as 2014,<sup>98</sup> the HX program saw the issuance of a request for information in 2016 in order to have finalized offers in April 2021 after a number of intensive tests. The budget selected reached 10 billion euros in exchange for 64 aircraft, a one-for-one replacement that has become fairly rare but a considerable financial effort that alone explains the increase in the Finnish military budget in recent years.<sup>99</sup> Five aircraft had initially been considered: Dassault Aviation's *Rafale*, the *Eurofighter*, Saab's *Gripen*, Lockheed Martin's F-35, and Boeing's *Super Hornet*.<sup>100</sup> Despite intense competition, the interviews conducted as part of this study estimate that only the last three candidates could plausibly have won.<sup>101</sup>

The Swedish *Gripen* offered the opportunity to deepen Nordic air cooperation with extensive pooling of platforms, munitions, and training

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97. "Long-term Development Is the Key to Sustained Air Defence Capability", Finnish Air Force, available at: <https://ilmavoimat.fi>.

98. R. Häggblom, "The HX-project Preliminary Report, pt.1: Reports, Politics, and Money", Corporal Frisk, June 29, 2015, available at: <https://corporalfrisk.com>.

99. "Pencils Down: Bids in for Finland's HX Fighter Programme", Airforce Technology, April 29, 2021, available at: [www.airforce-technology.com](http://www.airforce-technology.com).

100. *Ibid.*

101. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

and maintenance systems.<sup>102</sup> The Swedish offer was, moreover, augmented by *Global Eye* surveillance aircraft, similar to those ordered by France in 2025.

Boeing's offer capitalized on the Finnish experience acquired on the F-18 to offer a greatly improved version of the F/A-18E and EA-18G. It nonetheless appears that it covered only 50 aircraft and not 64 for the ten billion euros at stake, leading to its final disqualification. Finnish concerns about the durability of the production chain and, consequently, of the maintenance of the aircraft reportedly also weighed on the decision. The Finnish desire to embed this program over the long term and to avoid buying an aircraft with an uncertain medium-term operational life was already present in 2019, in order to anchor itself in a community of durable users.<sup>103</sup>

The F-35A was ultimately declared the winner of the tender in December 2021, citing better results in terms of performance, costs, maintenance, and industrial cooperation. The maintenance of the transatlantic relationship and the prospect of production continuing beyond 2040 also played in favor of this choice. Deliveries are expected to be staggered between 2026 and 2031, allowing for a gradual withdrawal of the F-18s<sup>104</sup> and an in-depth modernization of the bases due to host the new aircraft. The aircraft was sold with a complete suite of munitions. Eventually, the F-18s withdrawn from service should be scrapped, having consumed their entire potential, or even more.<sup>105</sup>

In the air-to-air domain, the allocation covers 150 *Sidewinder* AIM-9X air-to-air missiles and, more importantly still, Finland is one of the first countries to acquire the new version of the AMRAAM, the AIM-120 D3 (up to 405 units according to the U.S. administration). In the air-to-surface domain, the acquisitions cover the AGM-154 JSOW (target of 100 units) and AGM-158 JASSM-ER (200) air-to-ground missiles, GBU-53 *Small Diameter Bombs* (500) as well as several hundred JDAM guidance kits,<sup>106</sup> the whole notably giving Finland significant deep-strike capabilities.

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102. J. Raivio, "Sweden Is Courting Finland: A Joint Air Force And A Gripen Tailored to Finland's Needs – We'll Soon Find Out If Finland Will Receive Five Fighter Jet Offers", Suomen Kuvalehti, April 20, 2021, available at: <https://suomenkuvalehti.fi>.

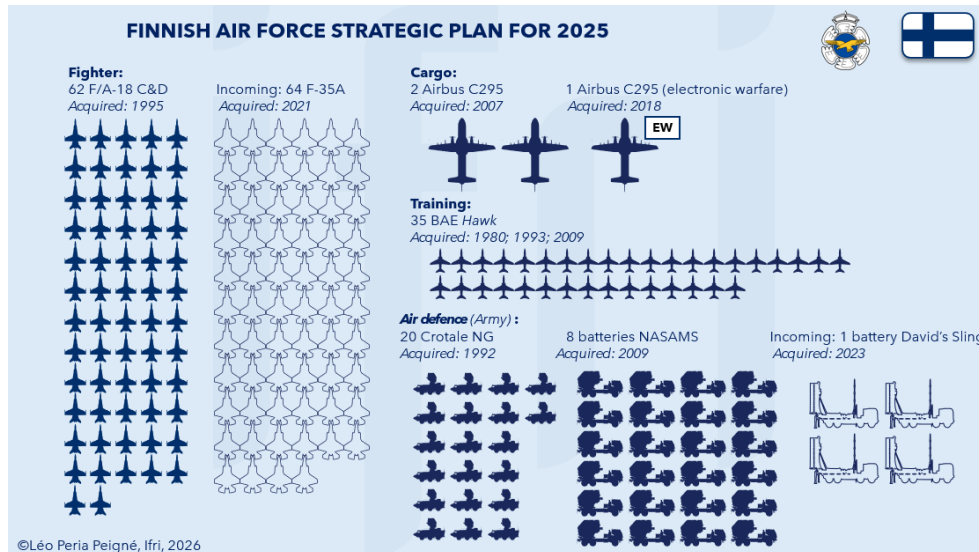
103. R. Häggblom, "HX Shifting Gears", Corporal Frisk, March 2, 2019, available at: <https://corporalfrisk.com>.

104. "Finland Chooses the F-35", Siivet, December 10, 2021, available at: <https://siivet.fi>.

105. Interviews conducted with Finnish civilian and military stakeholders, autumn 2025.

106. T. Newdick, "Here's the Full List of Kits Offered to Finland If It Chooses F-35 or Super Hornet", TWZ, October 9, 2020, available at: [www.twz.com](http://www.twz.com).

Figure II-9: Order of battle of the Finnish air force in 2025



Sources: *Military Balance*, interviews.

The arrival of the F-35s should also bring about a change in terms of training. With a cost per flight hour much higher than that of the F-18s, the Finnish air force will also have to integrate more simulator hours into the training of its pilots, around 50% of total flight training time.<sup>107</sup> Initial training is provided on 28 Grob 115s acquired in 2016, which should remain in service until 2040. Acquired in several tranches from 1980 onward, the fleet of 35 *Hawk* makes it possible to provide the rest of the training on jet aircraft. Of varying age, these aircraft should be withdrawn from service in the course of the 2030s and give rise to a simple replacement or to the delegation of part of the training to a private actor. The first steps of this process should be initiated in the course of 2026. With lessons learned from the Ukrainian conflict having underscored the capability of light aircraft in counter-drone warfare, this specificity could be added to the future tender in order to provide a low-spectrum capability to the future Finnish format centered on the F-35. With Denmark, Norway, Germany, and Finland having chosen the F-35, their national air forces could moreover choose to develop a Nordic training center on this platform as an alternative to the one existing in Sardinia, in order to have weather conditions closer to their own.<sup>108</sup>

The Finnish air force has only transport capabilities limited to two C-295Ms acquired in 2007, supplemented by a third aircraft dedicated to electronic warfare, acquired in 2018. The development of a larger capability does not appear to be on the agenda, and NATO accession gives Finland broader access to allied capabilities in this domain. VIP transport is provided by three *Learjet* 35s acquired in 1982 that are to be replaced *via*

107. "Facing the F-35 Challenge", Key Aero, available at: [www.key.aero](http://www.key.aero).

108. *Ibid.*

the JETX program launched in 2024.<sup>109</sup> Finland nonetheless announced in May 2025 its intention to join the European Air Transport Command and the European Defence Agency's Multinational MRTT Fleet initiative *via* Nordic Defence Cooperation (NORDEFCO).<sup>110</sup>

Finnish anti-aircraft defense falls under the land forces, and not the Air Force, but will be discussed here for the sake of clarity.

Low-layer defense, particularly important against the drone threat, relies on a fleet of 20 French Crotale NGs acquired in early 1992 and 16 ASRAD-R units (based on laser-guided Swedish RBS-70 SACP missiles reaching 9 km). It is supplemented by eight more recent Norwegian NASAMS-2 batteries, acquired in 2009.<sup>111</sup> This capability is to be supplemented by a battery of Israeli *David's Sling* acquired in 2023. The multipurpose radar of the Israeli system will complement a long-range detection architecture mainly provided by 12 mobile 3D Ground Master 403 radars from TRS delivered from 2013 onward to form a coherent and multilayered set of systems reaching 12, 30, and 300 km respectively,<sup>112</sup> capable of providing site defense against aircraft, cruise missiles, heavy rockets, and certain short-range ballistic missiles.

Close-in and accompanying defense, particularly important against the drone threat, is provided by about a hundred specialized vehicles launching the RBS-70, a Swedish man-portable surface-to-air missile reaching 9 km. With a unit cost exceeding one million euros, this solution is not suited to countering drones, and the response remains to be found. The Finnish army could reuse the large number of 23 mm guns of Soviet origin still in stock, whose disposal was being considered before 2022. A similar solution has been chosen by Poland as part of the Pilica+ program.<sup>113</sup>

Anti-aircraft defense could be an avenue of development for Nordic cooperation—Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark having signed a letter of intent in March 2023 to develop a unified air defense through a distinctly Nordic joint air operation concept but based on NATO processes.<sup>114</sup> This intention has yet to materialize, two years after its announcement.

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109. "Air Force Prepares Torepalce LJ Fleet", Lentoposti, December 20, 2024, available at: [www.lentoposti.fi](http://www.lentoposti.fi).

110. G. Jennings, "Nordic Neighbours to Join Multinational MRTT Fleet", *Janes*, June 6, 2025, available at: [www.janes.com](http://www.janes.com).

111. "Military Balance 2025", Institute of International Strategic Studies (IISS).

112. "Finland Purchases David's Sling Long-range Air Defence System from Israel", *Shephard Media*, November 13, 2025, available at: [www.shephardmedia.com](http://www.shephardmedia.com).

113. L. Péria-Peigné and A. Zima, "Pologne, première armée d'Europe en 2035 ?", *op. cit.*

114. L. Lagneau, "Les pays nordiques veulent se doter d'une 'défense aérienne unifiée'", *Opex 360*, March 25, 2023, available at: [www.opex360.com](http://www.opex360.com).

## ***Dispersing aircraft to survive***

Despite its surface area, Finland has only limited strategic depth, with most of its territory hemmed in between the sea and the Russian border, with an average east-west width of less than 300 km. As a result, most Finnish military infrastructure is within direct range of long-range Russian vectors. Already feared before the conflict in Ukraine, this threat has taken on increased magnitude with the development of low-cost, long-range effectors such as the *Shahed*. In addition to a reinforced need for close-in anti-aircraft defense, dispersal is more than ever a survival issue for a Finnish air force that is powerful but vulnerable: with only two combat squadrons spread over two well-known and identified bases, the ability to deploy and operate from other airfields is a major survival issue.

Dispersal is thus one of the fundamentals of Finnish air doctrine, including in its use of reservists mobilized in the event of conflict. A large part of the 29,000 potential mobilized of the wartime format of the Finnish air force would thus be assigned to the protection of more than 100 secondary airfields and improvised airstrips planned in advance. Military as well as civilian airports can thus be put to use, as can the country's highways, the architecture of certain segments of which was designed for this purpose from the outset. The bulk of the other mobilized reservists must, at short notice and accompanied by professionals, be able to join special and unmarked convoys to bring fuel, munitions, parts, runway equipment, and personnel to these locations in order to guarantee a minimum operational continuity. This mode of operation, which would be a "degraded mode" for many modern air forces, is thus the normal mode of operation planned in the event of conflict.

Conducted every year since 2017, the *Ruska* exercise thus brought together 5,000 troops, of whom 2,900 were reservists, in order to simulate such a dispersal with, for the first time, a participation of the Swedish air force. The latter, moreover, benefits from good integration with the Finnish C2 and ground-to-air defense for its *Gripen*. Sweden itself has an operational concept similar to that of Finland, although it is possibly less based on movement and more on a more limited number of hardened bases, a difference made possible by the more mountainous nature of the country. The extension of this concept to neighboring Norway, or even to Denmark and the Baltic states, would make it possible to further increase its relevance and resilience. The concept of *Nordic Cross-Border Basing*, developed since 2021, should accelerate in the coming years, facilitated by the NORDEFECO framework.<sup>115</sup>

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115. "Baseline Study of Cross-Border Data Exchange in the Nordic and Baltic Countries", Nordic Co-operation, November 29, 2021, available at: [www.norden.org](http://www.norden.org).

This internationalization of the Finnish concept to the Nordic region is, moreover, consistent with the American *Agile Concept Employment* (ACE) concept adapted within NATO by AIRCOM. At the regional level, it should make it possible to further increase the number of available diversion airfields, by allowing the F-18s and the future Finnish F-35s to deploy on the other side of the Baltic. The acceleration of the reconnaissance-strike loop on the Russian side, honed by the conflict in Ukraine, is a powerful motivation to accelerate this extension. This development requires not only excellent interoperability, understood as the ability to operate in concert, but also strong interchangeability, with Swedish and Finnish ground personnel having to be able to carry out maintenance and rearmament operations on allied aircraft models as much as on their own.

While the F-18s can be considered relatively rugged aircraft that fit well with a maintenance environment essentially manned by reservists, the arrival of the F-35 in units could, however, represent a substantial vulnerability for this model. Far more complex, Lockheed Martin's aircraft requires much more advanced maintenance in terms of both hardware and internal software. Regular updating of the latter is, moreover, an absolute necessity to maintain an optimal combat capability of the F-35. The interviews conducted as part of this study made it possible to observe that the Finnish air force does not intend to change its employment framework but rather to adapt its practice to its new fighter-bomber.

The mobile trains should receive equipment more suited to field maintenance operations, notably for the transport of the aircraft's modules, munitions, and components. Software issues should be resolved by the adoption of mobile diagnostic and update tools developed by Lockheed Martin, notably as part of the development of the ACE concept.<sup>116</sup> The Atlantic Trident 25 exercise conducted in 2025 thus enabled the British, American, and French air forces to implement this concept as part of a scenario in which NATO allies would come to the aid of an attacked Finland.<sup>117</sup> The fact that the Finnish air force has integrated the Alliance's Link 16 for years is, from this point of view, a valuable asset.

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116. R. Häggblom, "Stealth, Dispersed Operations, and a Big Jammer", Corporal Frisk, April 7, 2021, available at: <https://corporalfrisk.com>.

117. R. Häggblom, "Atlantic Trident 25 – You're All Invited", Corporal Frisk, July 14, 2025, available at: <https://corporalfrisk.com>.

# A budding Franco-Finnish cooperation?

As a particularly capable new ally, Finland is a much-sought-after partner, by NATO countries as well as by others farther afield. Since 2022, France has been part of this dynamic by intensifying its military relations with Helsinki, with the armed forces having particular interests in studying the Finnish model. Although Paris is not among Helsinki's privileged relationships, France and Finland maintain a bilateral relationship outside any multinational organization. Finnish strategic apprehension is indeed first turned toward Washington or toward a more restricted regional Baltic circle. In these circumstances, it is necessary to consider several avenues regarding the evolution of Franco-Finnish relations.

## The French pivot to the East

In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, France initiated a pivot toward the Eastern flank of the Alliance, in a break with a French attention long focused on the Southern flank.<sup>118</sup> This pivot was characterized by a more marked presence in NATO's posture in Romania as well as in Estonia, as well as by more marked attention to bilateral relations with the countries of Nordic, Central, and Eastern Europe, illustrated by the rapprochement with Sweden or the Treaty of Nancy signed in 2025 with Poland.

The relationship with Finland benefited from this renewed interest, notably in the military domain. An until-then marginal actor in the Baltic Sea, the French Navy has multiplied port calls in the ports of the coastal countries and increased its exchanges with the local navies, notably in the field of navigation in ice. The Air and Space Force has also become more present, notably in Sweden and Finland, through NATO exercises to test the A400M in Arctic conditions. The Army, too, has intensified its exchanges through similar modalities, interested in Finnish expertise on Arctic combat and on morale.

The Finnish vision of France has also evolved. French leniency toward Russia, notably illustrated by the aborted contract on the sale of *Mistral* projection and command vessels, long weighed on the Finnish perception, but France's increased participation in NATO exercises and

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118. É. Tenenbaum, "Retour à l'Est : la France, la menace russe et la défense du 'Flanc Est' de l'Europe", *Focus stratégique*, No. 119, Ifri, June 2024.

postures on the Eastern flank and in the Baltic since 2022 has helped to nuance this view. The interviews conducted thus underscored the importance of the 2023 GlobSec summit in this evolution,<sup>119</sup> although the weakness of French military aid to Ukraine, including after 2023, was also mentioned several times.

Generally speaking, the French image has evolved positively in Finland, but Paris's commitment in the region has yet to be confirmed over the long term, while being placed in competition with strong regional dynamics in which France does not participate, such as the letter of intent on mine warfare. Finnish interest in France is also marked by increased attention to issues related to nuclear deterrence, NATO accession having opened up in this domain a set of new possibilities for the country, which is gradually assimilating its language. In early March 2026, the Finnish defense minister thus declared that he wanted to amend Finnish legislation in order to allow the deployment of nuclear weapons on its territory in the event of a crisis, that is, to facilitate the dispersal of the American B61 gravity bombs present in certain Alliance countries as part of nuclear-sharing arrangements. In parallel, Finland showed interest in the concept of "advanced deterrence" presented by Emmanuel Macron in his March 2 speech at Île Longue, to which other countries of Eastern and Northern Europe (Denmark, Sweden, Poland) have already rallied. Parliamentary debates are, on the other hand, necessary before intensifying Franco-Finnish cooperation in this area in order to maintain the national consensus.<sup>120</sup>

The comparison of French and British engagement in the region has been made on several occasions. London benefits from a long-term regional engagement, but the multiple deficiencies of its armed forces undermine its credibility. Paris is perceived as more credible from this point of view, but nonetheless suffers from the recent nature of the intensification of its presence. The state of public finances and the results of the 2027 French elections are other points of uncertainty as to the future of Paris-Helsinki relations, all the more so as a return to normal of transatlantic relations is hoped for by many after 2028 and the departure of Donald Trump.

Beyond the dynamics underway and Finnish interest in deterrence, Arctic issues could be an avenue to follow to enable the development of Franco-Finnish relations that stand out from the multiple solicitations Helsinki faces, while thinking over the long term. The objective would be to seek to establish specialized relations on certain segments less covered

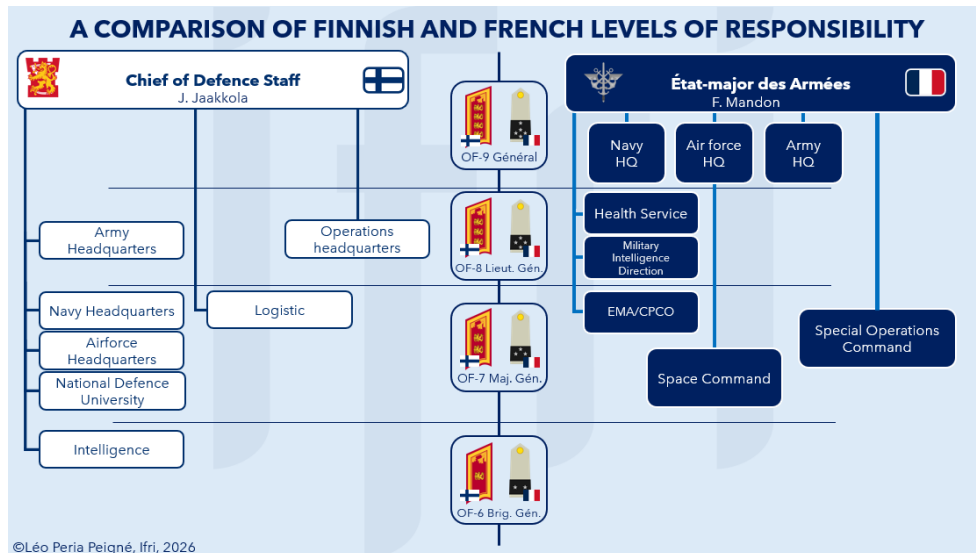
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119. B. Kunz, "Can France Lead? European Security in Times of Transatlantic Crisis", *FIIA Briefing Paper*, FIIA, April 2025.

120. A.-F. Hivert, "Dissuasion nucléaire : les pays nordiques en ordre dispersé", *Le Monde*, March 10, 2026.

by others, without necessarily developing a holistic partnership in a region where the French presence remains limited and in competition with other more invested actors, such as the United Kingdom or Germany.

**Figure III-1: Comparison of Finnish and French levels of responsibility**



Source: interviews.

## Army

Driven by a particular effort of the French Special Forces and the 27th Mountain Infantry Brigade (BIM), relations between the French and Finnish land forces have intensified. A new Forward Land Force (FLF) is expected to emerge in northern Finland, with Sweden as the framework nation. The objective would be to develop a new model, adapted to Finnish training cycles, to allow the organization of biannual exercises so that each conscript cohort can take part. While France is in parallel developing its relations with Sweden, a renewed FLF in a tripartite Finland-Sweden-France framework could launch a relevant dynamic to deepen the French pivot to the East.

The objective would not be so much to transform the 27th BIM into an Arctic brigade as to anchor the French presence in the region in order to capture its know-how while concretizing its engagement in the zone over the long term. The prolonged presence of several months of French elements for the NATO *Cold Response 2026* exercise will be an opportunity to experiment with a better integration into the Finnish posture to prepare for the future. A possible purchase of CAESAR guns for Finnish coastal artillery would be another opportunity to strengthen a nascent partnership in segments little practiced by other actors. In the longer term, a possible reorganization and rationalization of the FLFs could see a better distribution of roles among framework nations, leaving the Baltic states to

the British and the Germans, while France would devote itself more to Finland. This evolution must, however, be done in coherence with the French presence in Romania.

## ***Air Force***

Cooperation between the French and Finnish air forces, already reinforced since 2022, has further increased with Finland's accession to NATO, whose procedures and standards it had already largely adopted. Several air exercises have already taken place in this multilateral NATO framework with a good level of compatibility between the forces.

It is, however, difficult to find other prospects for direct cooperation between the air forces. In the event of conflict and application of the ACE doctrine, French aircraft would deploy more in Sweden or Norway than in Finland to limit their exposure to Russian fire. With the withdrawal of the French Crotales in favor of the Mica VL, French and Finnish anti-aircraft defenses no longer have common platforms, limiting the possibilities of capability cooperation. Finally, the heavily professionalized model of the AAE and that of the Finnish air force based on conscription have very little in common, further reducing the possible convergences outside the existing dynamics, the AAE having only very marginal recourse to reservists.

Two minor avenues can nonetheless be mentioned. The Finnish example could be put to use for the development of the reserve within the air force, aiming to gain mass on jobs whose required level of qualification, being more limited, does not require professional personnel. The Finnish air force thus employs its reservists on support, basic maintenance, base protection, but also close-in counter-drone missions. In addition, the AAE struggles to retain its experienced pilots and technical personnel and lacks a reserve mechanism into which any personnel leaving the forces would be automatically transferred. Such a mechanism has long existed in Finland, a model that could feed French reflection on a reform of its system in order to have qualified human resources in the event of conflict or to ensure the continuity of training pipelines.

## ***Navy***

The Baltic Sea is today the subject of sustained attention and is at the heart of a large part of the new cooperation and partnerships forged by Finland. A strategic theater if ever there was one, the Baltic could, however, see its importance diminish in the medium term. It remains today an important commercial axis for Russia, which has an interest in maintaining a strong presence there despite its transformation into a quasi-NATO lake, for lack of anything better. The gradual thawing of the Arctic and the opening of new commercial routes could, however, relegate it to the background in the medium term in favor of the development of Murmansk and Russia's

northernmost ports. The development of a Sino-Russian Northern route would entail a longer handling time between Murmansk and the heart of Russia, but this would be offset by a greatly shortened maritime journey of about twenty days. In these circumstances, the importance Moscow places on the Baltic—an enclosed sea in the hands of NATO navies through which 50% of Russian exports, notably hydrocarbons, transit—would be greatly reduced. France’s Arctic strategy has been developing for a few years, notably with the publication of an official document in the summer of 2025.<sup>121</sup> This strategy has yet to be concretized and developed to enable France to prepare for a possible Russian strategic shift from the Baltic to the Arctic, offering new prospects for long-term cooperation with Finland.

Rather than adding to a specific Baltic theater that is already crowded and potentially downgraded in the medium term, it could thus be interesting to orient the Franco-Finnish relationship toward issues that are also more northern, all the more so as Finnish competence in the field of icebreakers no longer needs to be demonstrated. In addition, the development of the Finnish Navy toward more oceangoing ships could make it possible to envisage missions and cooperation beyond the Baltic Sea alone and to open new horizons to Finnish sailors in the North Atlantic. The Baltic Sea remains an excellent training ground for mine clearance or navigation in ice, two aspects already worked on by the French Navy with its Finnish counterpart. Enabling the latter to leave it, even occasionally, would make it possible to rebalance a partnership sometimes perceived as one-way by showing that France can also bring a certain number of skills to its partner.

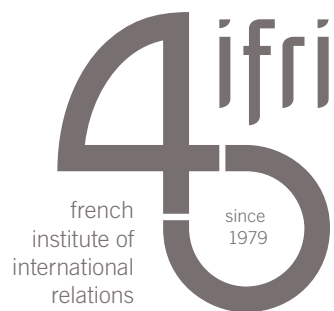
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121. “Stratégie de défense pour l’Arctique : défendre nos intérêts dans une région en mutation”, French Ministry of the Armed Forces, July 10, 2025, available at: [www.defense.gouv.fr](http://www.defense.gouv.fr).

# Conclusion

For more than 70 years, the Finnish military model was built on the prospect of a direct and solitary confrontation with the Soviet, then Russian, neighbor. Finnish society and its relationship to defense issues are marked by this latent possibility, rekindled by the invasion of Ukraine. NATO accession allows Finland to integrate into a much broader defensive posture, breaking with seven decades of forced “Finlandization”. Helsinki gains a certain number of assurances for its own national security, and NATO a valuable ally in the context of European rearmament. Limited in volume, the Finnish forces have indeed managed to preserve a set of sought-after skills around the issues of conscription, total defense, naval mining, or the dispersal of air forces.

For its part, France is continuing its pivot toward the Eastern flank, notably increasing its presence in the Baltic Sea. Long limited, the relationship between Paris and Helsinki has experienced a significant resurgence of dynamism since 2022, and exchanges between the forces are intensifying. While France is still a rather secondary actor in the zone, the good relations between the two countries bilaterally and within NATO could constitute a solid base for fostering a more lasting establishment, notably in the context of a possible new FLF led by Sweden in Finland alongside France.



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