

# BE PREPARED: SHAPING EU-NATO COOPERATION THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVES OF ESTONIA, FINLAND, AND SWEDEN

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POLICY PAPER  
JANUARY 2025



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[Image] The Finnish Police Special Intervention Unit Karhu and the Gulf of Finland Coast Guard Special Intervention Unit board the Russian shadow fleet tanker Eagle S on Christmas Day 2024. The tanker is suspected of cutting the Estlink 2 undersea power cable, which connects Finland and Estonia. (Photo: Finnish Border Guard [Rajavartiolaitos])

[Cover] Marjaniemi Lighthouse on Hailuoto Island, Finland. (Photo: Remo Vilkkö, Unsplash)

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ISBN 978-952-69019-4-7 (softcover)  
ISBN 978-952-69019-5-4 (PDF)

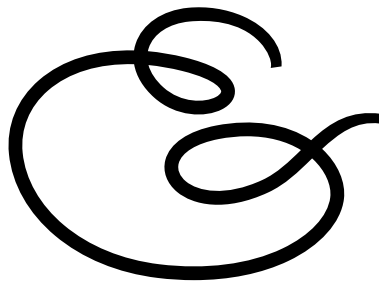
Publisher:

Elisabeth Rehn – Bank of Ideas

This publication is part of a Elisabeth Rehn - Bank of Ideas Nordic Security Dialogue II project. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland has supported the project as part of its discretionary government grants to Finnish civil society organisations in the field of foreign and security policy for 2024. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and thus do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland or Elisabeth Rehn - Bank of Ideas.

# INTRODUCTION

1 Iso-Markku 2024.



Efforts to increase coordination and cooperation between the EU and NATO have taken many shapes and forms. Until recently, however, progress has been slow, and the relationship has been characterized by vagueness and competition.<sup>1</sup>

In 2002, the EU and NATO institutionally recognized their cooperation with the "NATO-EU Declaration on a European Security and Defence Policy" (ESDP), defining the relationship as a "strategic partnership". The Declaration focused on crisis management in the context of the Western Balkans conflict and the EU's need to enhance its military capabilities. It reaffirmed the EU's assured access to NATO's planning capabilities for its own military operations.

The division of labour between NATO and the EU in Europe has traditionally seen NATO focusing on hard security, while the EU's strength lies in its soft security mandates. The transition has spanned a long arc, from comprehensive crisis management to a comprehensive security approach, and today the European-wide enhanced understanding of defence prioritization is creating opportunities for EU-NATO cooperation like never before. With Finland and Sweden joining NATO as new members in 2022 and 2023 respectively, tangible solutions for the benefit of all of Europe, from the Arctic Ocean and the High North to the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean South, are now within reach.

Lately, the need for closer cooperation between the EU and NATO has been reinforced by at least three factors. First and foremost, Russia's unprovoked war of aggression in Ukraine has united the two Western blocs in an unprecedented manner. Secondly, the need to cooperate stems from the United States' "pivot", signalling that American attention is gradually shifting from Europe, "the old continent", to securing strategic partnerships, supply lines, and deterring China in Asia. The implication of this is that the EU needs to be prepared to strengthen European defence separately from the United States. Thirdly, the threats that both the EU and NATO face are not purely civilian or military. In fact, hybrid interference or grey zone threats challenge this traditional threat perception.

# CHAPTER I

The purpose of this policy paper is to explore the current state of cooperation between the EU and NATO, and to highlight the comprehensive security perspectives of Estonia, Finland, and Sweden. The policy paper is published to coincide with the January 2025 event in Brussels, *Comprehensive Security Best Practices: How Can the EU and NATO Work Better Together?*, organized jointly by the three entities of the European Policy Centre (EPC), Elisabeth Rehn - Bank of Ideas, and the Finnish-Swedish Cultural Centre Hanaholmen. The paper is a continuation of the report on the comprehensive security cooperation between Estonia, Finland, and Sweden published for the inaugural Nordic Security Dialogue event in August 2023, *Integrated Security in the Northern Baltic: A comparative study on Finland, Estonia, and Sweden*.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Kuronen & Tõlli 2023. The report clarified the different security concepts in Estonia, Finland, and Sweden and was based on expert interviews.

Based on the examples of Estonia, Finland, and Sweden the paper seeks to address the following question:

How can the Nordics and Baltics support the development of EU-NATO security cooperation?

The paper is structured as follows: In the next section (2), the current state of EU-NATO security cooperation at the strategic level is briefly outlined. The section is followed by an introduction to the comprehensive security concepts of Estonia, Finland and Sweden (3). The fourth section (4), in turn, discusses the possibilities for strengthening EU-NATO cooperation, while the last section (5) provides conclusions for policymakers.

# EU-NATO SECURITY COOPERATION

3 NATO 2024a.

In his first press conference as the new head of NATO on 1 October 2024, Secretary General Mark Rutte highlighted the EU as an “essential partner” for NATO in cooperation ranging from support for Ukraine to military mobility and defence production. He stressed that duplication is not needed in terms of defence, but that both the EU and NATO share a joint understanding of the need for greater complementarity and interoperability between the two organizations.<sup>3</sup> As staunch supporters of Ukraine, offering economic and defence-related aid, the EU and NATO, with their members, have to deal in practice with the European security crisis of this century. Assisting Ukraine provides an opportunity to accelerate joint cooperation where possible and to put it to the test, as the initial four-year term of Secretary General Rutte and the final five-year term of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen are bound to be heavily defined by the outcome of events in Ukraine.

4 NATO 2024b.

5 According to the EU’s security strategy, known as the Strategic Compass (2022), the Rapid Reaction Force, referred to as the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), should be established by 2025, consisting of up to 5,000 troops. The force could be used e.g., for evacuation operations such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 (Mašlanka 2024).

At the institutional level, EU-NATO cooperation has increased notably in recent years as a result of three successive Joint EU-NATO Declarations (in 2016, 2018, and 2023).<sup>4</sup> The establishment of the EU Rapid Reaction Force,<sup>5</sup> improvements in the mobility of military personnel and equipment, and the full use of the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)<sup>6</sup> have been identified as flagships for EU-NATO cooperation.<sup>7</sup> In 2017, the EU and NATO welcomed the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) in Helsinki, initiated by Finland. Both the Secretary General of NATO and the EU Commission High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy were present at the inauguration. The Centre is a practical example of cooperation between EU and NATO member states. With regard to recent hybrid activities in the Baltic Sea involving the cutting of undersea power cables, it is worth highlighting that NATO and the EU established a Task Force on Resilience of Critical Infrastructure as early as 2023. This initiative is part of the ongoing Structured Dialogue on Resilience, launched by the EU and NATO in 2022, which serves as one of the main mechanisms for inter-institutional cooperation in practice.<sup>8</sup>

6 All EU countries, except Malta and including the UK, participate in PESCO (established in 2017 and administered by the European External Action Service, the European Military Staff, and the European Defence Agency). By 2024, there were over 65 PESCO projects led by European member states, aimed at improving defence collaboration among them.

7 Sikorski 2024; Mašlanka 2024; Chihai 2023.

8 EU-NATO 2023.

9 European Commission 2024a.

10 European Parliament 2024a; Euractiv 2024a.

11 NATO’s spending target is being discussed to potentially increase to 3% of GDP by 2030, but even higher figures, up to 5%, may follow after January 2025 inauguration of the elected U.S. president, Donald Trump (Politico 2024a).

Under the leadership of the new, recently appointed NATO Secretary General and the European Commission, the EU and NATO have a tangible opportunity to enhance their cooperation. During their first official meeting, European Commission President von der Leyen and NATO Secretary General Rutte agreed to set up a new high-level task force, with preparations expected to begin in late 2024.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the European Parliament’s former Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE) has been voted a full-fledged committee on 18 December 2024.<sup>10</sup> This move will give it a broader and more visible role in addressing joint EU-NATO cooperation needs at the European level. For the first time, the EU has appointed a Commissioner for Defence and Space, who will be former Lithuanian prime minister and former MEP Andrius Kubilius for the period 2024–2029. He is tasked with developing the so-called “European Defence Union”, focusing on the defence industry and boosting the EU’s strategic autonomy in advancing its defence capability. While NATO focuses on furthering national defence capabilities, making the 2% of GDP expenditure target the baseline rather than the goal,<sup>11</sup> the EU has an opportunity to complement this with an additional focus on channelling funds to defence, such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), to sustain and advance capability development and research projects in the coming years.

# COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY COOPERATION IN ESTONIA, FINLAND, AND SWEDEN

## 3.1. ESTONIA

Estonia's comprehensive security model, which integrates military defence, civil defence, psychological defence, internal security, vital services, and international relations, is shaped by Estonia's history and geographical proximity to Russia, a factor that necessitates robust security measures. At its core, the system emphasizes resilience through the involvement of all layers of society and relies heavily on NATO to bolster its security, while maintaining mandatory conscription and a well-organized reserve system, similar to those in Finland and Sweden.<sup>12</sup> The Security Council, led by the Prime Minister, includes key ministers and addresses urgent security concerns, such as Russia's war in Ukraine. The reviewed Act,<sup>13</sup> which came into force on 18 October 2024, seeks to unify crisis management under one mechanism, merging defence and emergency laws and eliminating distinctions between wartime and peacetime leadership.<sup>14</sup> The PM now leads in all situations. This reform reflects a shift towards centralized and integrated security leadership in Estonia.<sup>15</sup>

Estonia's cybersecurity leadership stands out globally. The development of advanced cyber defence was accelerated by the 2007 Russian cyberattacks, which shaped Estonia's policy on critical infrastructure and information warfare and led to Estonia being cited as a model for Finland and Sweden. The advanced digital society and robust cybersecurity framework, led by the Information System Authority (RIA), as well as the establishment of the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in Tallinn in 2008, reflect Estonia's ability to adapt to modern hybrid threats, particularly those posed by Russia through disinformation and cyber operations.

In turn, Estonia's key strength in integrated security is its low-hierarchy administrative culture, agility, and capacity for faster decision-making to address complex and comprehensive crises. Estonia's advantages also lie in its digital and cybersecurity capabilities as well as its developed voluntary defence system. Furthermore, Finland and Sweden have much to learn from Estonia's experience and knowledge of Russia, but also from Estonia's two decades of NATO membership. However, Estonia's small size is both a strength and a weakness. Both financial and human resources are rather limited, and the administrative units and broad subject areas are managed by just a handful of people. The Estonian security system is also very military defence-oriented, and efforts to change the administrative culture need to be continued.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The Finnish conscription system was officially established in 1878 and has since served as the foundation for forming the Finnish Defence Forces' reserve. In contrast, Sweden abolished mandatory conscription in 2010, only to reinstate it as selective conscription in 2017 to strengthen the Swedish Armed Forces.

<sup>13</sup> Emergency Act 2024.

<sup>14</sup> Following the Covid-19 crisis, a similar development is underway in Finland, where the Emergency Powers Act is currently under review. The government plans to present its proposal to parliament in autumn 2025 (Ministry of Justice Finland 2024).

<sup>15</sup> The Government of Estonia 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Kuronen & Tölli 2023.

17 Defence Industry Europe 2023; The Defense Post 2024.

18 NATO 2024c.

Estonia's comprehensive security strategy combines military preparedness, infrastructure development, and international collaboration, but continues to focus heavily on developing military capabilities. For example, the joint air defence procurement with Latvia and Germany addresses regional defence gaps, along with the construction of Camp Reedo, a military base near the Russian border that will host NATO troops by 2025.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, nearly 600 border bunkers and enhanced surveillance systems strengthen resilience along the border, which is further enhanced by border security collaboration with Finland. With defence spending exceeding 3% of GDP, and temporarily rising to 5%, Estonia's defence spending is the second highest in Europe after Poland, further demonstrating its commitment as a NATO member to ensuring regional stability.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2. FINLAND

19 The model encompasses seven vital functions, carried out collaboratively by the government, the authorities, business operators, organizations, and citizens. These functions are categorized as 1) leadership, 2) international and EU activities, 3) defence capability, 4) internal security, 5) economy, infrastructure, and security of supply, 6) functional capability of the population and services, and 7) psychological resilience. The Security Strategy for Society (last updated in 2017) is currently under revision, with the new strategy due to be published in February 2025. It is expected to place greater emphasis than the previous one on the role of citizens in societal preparedness.

20 The Finnish Government 2024a.

21 Kuronen & Tölli 2023.

In Finland, societal resilience is understood as a comprehensive security concept, which is based on a citizen-centric, whole-of-government approach. According to the Finnish concept, societal resilience is built upon the ability to maintain vital functions for society in all circumstances. The operating model for comprehensive security is described in the Security Strategy for Society (Yhteiskunnan turvallisuusstrategia YTS).<sup>19</sup> Finland also published an online guide in November 2024, Preparing for Incidents and Crises, aimed at the entire population.<sup>20</sup>

Finland's key strengths include the above-mentioned comprehensive security concept, wide-ranging preparedness, security of supply planning, and the involvement of non-governmental organizations and businesses in maintaining the security of society – factors that are still a work in progress in Estonia and Sweden. Finland is also praised for maintaining its extensive (albeit gendered) national defence and conscription system. Furthermore, the Finnish word "sisu" (translated as determination and guts, among other things) is seen as a Finnish psychological strength, describing citizens' persistence and resilience in the face of external threats, particularly those stemming from the Winter War, Finland's defensive war against the Soviet Union in 1939–1940.<sup>21</sup>

22 The President of the Republic of Finland 2024; ABDI 2024.

23 Citizens' willingness to defend their country is also exceptionally high (around 80%) in Estonia and Sweden. Similarly, both countries organize national defence courses, arranged by the MSB in Sweden, and the International Centre of Defence and Security (ICDS) in Estonia. In addition Estonia, Finland, and Sweden all have an active voluntary sector of national defence and preparedness organizations (Kuronen & Tölli 2023).

24 The training programme is organized in collaboration with the Finnish and Swedish National Defence Universities, the Finnish Security Committee, the MSB, and the NESAs (Hanaholmen 2024).

The centrepiece of security of supply is the National Emergency Supply Agency (NESA), which is responsible for coordinating and managing critical production and stocks (food), services (fuel), and infrastructure (data), particularly between the private and public sectors in the event of serious incidents and emergencies. In terms of civil preparedness, there are more than 50,000 civil defence shelters in Finland for a total of 4.8 million people, covering most of Finland's population of 5.6 million. Citizens' crisis resilience is reflected in a strong willingness to defend, with approximately 80% of Finns willing to defend their country, and in the National Defence Courses organized by the Finnish Defence Forces since 1961. The courses, which have been running for over 60 years, focus on comprehensive security and defence awareness, bringing together leading actors from different sectors of society.<sup>22, 23</sup> Since 2021, the Finnish-Swedish Cultural Centre Hanaholmen has also organized a civil preparedness training programme, the Hanaholmen Initiative, for leading experts from Finland and Sweden.<sup>24</sup>



## CHAPTER III

The downside of the Finnish culture of maintenance is that Finland seems to have less desire and ability to renew itself compared to Estonia and Sweden, which have made significant security policy reforms since the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's attack on Ukraine. One of the key challenges of the Finnish model is the ambiguity of leadership, as the leadership of comprehensive security and EU-NATO affairs is divided between the President and the Prime Minister. For example, during the cross-sectoral Covid-19 crisis, there was a dispute between the President and the PM over crisis management responsibilities. In Estonia and Sweden, no such problem exists, as the PM has clear leadership responsibility for foreign and security policy.<sup>25</sup> The renewed comprehensive security strategy, combined with a reform of state-level security management expected in spring 2025, will help Finland to narrow the gap with Estonia and Sweden when it comes to comprehensive security initiatives updated since the global crises of the last five years.<sup>26</sup>

A recent example of Finland's comprehensive security cooperation between policy-makers, government, authorities, and NGOs is Finland's December 2023 decision to close its 1,340-kilometre eastern border – the longest external border shared by both the EU and NATO with Russia – to combat Russia's use of instrumentalized migration as a tool of hybrid influence. At the beginning of the crisis in autumn 2023, Finnish Red Cross volunteers assisted asylum seekers at the request of the Finnish Border Guard.<sup>27</sup> In summer 2024, the new Act on Temporary Measures to Combat Instrumentalized Migration was approved, allowing the closure of the eastern border crossing points until further notice.<sup>28</sup>

Former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö's report on strengthening the EU's civilian and military preparedness and readiness in the face of different crises, published in October 2024, presents an exhaustive list of recommendations, one of the most important of which is to enhance EU-NATO cooperation in any crisis, including armed attack. The report is based on the Finnish and wider Nordic whole-of-government and whole-of-society concepts of comprehensive security<sup>29</sup> and Finland's initiative for an EU Preparedness Union.<sup>30</sup> Niinistö calls for an all-threats and all-hazards approach, and for ensuring seamless coordination and information exchange between the EU and NATO in the event of an activation of Article 42.7 of the European Union (Mutual Assistance Clause) and/or Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. There is still no agreed set of standard operating procedures and emergency protocols between the EU and NATO for these scenarios, as the prospect of war against an EU member state has long been considered too politically sensitive and potentially divisive. According to Niinistö, this no longer holds true.<sup>31</sup> NATO Secretary General Rutte has also recently stressed that it is time to "shift to a wartime mindset", warning that Alliance members are not investing enough to prepare for the threat of future conflict with Russia.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.3. SWEDEN

In Sweden, resilience and comprehensive security are referred to as "total defence". In essence, this encompasses all activities necessary to prepare Sweden for war. The Swedish concept is divided into two main pillars: military defence and civil defence, both of which accommodate whole-of-society thinking on how to integrate the efforts of the private sector, the general public and the government. Sweden is actively rebuilding its total defence system, which was radically downsized after the Cold War in the 1990s, and has implemented several bold reforms to modernize it. Among the most visible recent changes are the establishment of the position of Minister for Civil Defence within the Ministry of Defence in 2022, and the creation of a National Security Council (NSC),<sup>33</sup> led by the Prime Minister and composed pri-

25 Kuronen & Tölli 2023. The downside of an executive model centred around the Prime Minister can be that if the PM is weak, it can cause problems in a crisis situation.

26 Helsingin Sanomat 2024a.

27 The Finnish Red Cross 2023.

28 The Prime Minister's Office of Finland 2024.

29 Wigell et al. 2022; Ketola 2023.

30 Finland in EU 2024.

31 Niinistö 2024.

32 BBC 2024.

33 The Government Offices of Sweden 2024a.



marily of key ministers from the Ministries of Justice, Foreign Affairs, Defence, and Finance. A designated National Security Advisor assists the PM and the NSC in their work, and a designated Director-General for Crisis Management acts as the Deputy National Security Adviser. Additionally, a Psychological Defence Agency, overseen by the Ministry of Defence and the Minister for Civil Defence, was established in 2022 to coordinate, develop and strengthen Sweden's psychological defence. Further improvements in comprehensive security include the reactivation of civil conscription alongside military conscription, rearmament and the development of security of supply and business involvement.

In the summer of 2024, the Swedish government published Sweden's National Security Strategy (the previous strategy was published in January 2017). The strategy highlights ongoing efforts to renew Sweden's total defence concept and to strengthen the country's crisis management capabilities – now even more vital as a defence alliance contributor – emphasizing the importance of creating clarity in decision-making channels to guide the work of the authorities, regions and municipalities, and the private sector in national security matters.

- 34 The Government Offices of Sweden 2024b. As NATO's newest member, Sweden is actively seeking a role in strengthening the Alliance's military and civil defence capabilities. In October 2024, the Swedish government presented a Total Defence Bill for the period 2025–2030, with historically large investments to reinforce the three branches of military defence, along with a focus on NATO capability targets and defence innovation. On the civil defence side, the Bill aims to ramp up and clarify the command aspects of civil defence in situations on the cusp of war.<sup>34</sup>
- 35 MSB 2022.
- 36 The Government Offices of Sweden 2024c. Sweden garnered both domestic and international attention in 2018 when the government sent a brochure to all households in the country through the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), a central comprehensive security authority, with the aim of increasing public awareness and involvement in preparedness.<sup>35</sup> This was last conducted in the 1940s and 1960s, at the height of the Second World War and the Cold War, respectively. The brochure, titled *In case of crisis or war*, was updated by Sweden's new government in October 2024 and has already been distributed to five million households nationwide.<sup>36</sup> While the 2018 publication was seen by some as an overreaction, with the benefit of hindsight and with the release of the new version, Sweden has recognized the power of communicating central aspects of preparedness to its population. By using offline communication in a traditional format, the government also ensures that information sharing is neither dependent on nor competing with various digital distribution platforms for attention.
- 37 MSB 2024. Sweden's strength lies in its consensus-oriented culture of cooperation and its decentralized and inclusive security system. Public agencies are strong, proactive, and capable. Sweden's advantage also lies in its ability to think boldly outside the box and to implement wide-ranging reforms (such as the establishment of the position of Minister for Civil Defence in 2022). Additionally, Sweden's strong export-led industry and considerable government investment in the private sector are an asset. Sweden has numerous coordination groups where government agencies collaborate with the private sector to advise on and coordinate crisis preparedness, including in the energy, cyber, finance, media, telecommunications and food supply sectors, while also educating private sector companies on strengthening their preparedness.<sup>37</sup>
- 38 Kuronen & Tölli 2023. The downside of the consensus-oriented and decentralized security system is its lack of speed and decisiveness in terms of security decision-making, an area where it could learn from Finland and Estonia. Moreover, in all the focus countries, especially in Sweden, strategic-level planning seems to be decoupled from regional and local-level plans and calls for action. Sweden also has clear legal boundaries when it comes to peace and war, which could be exploited by malicious actors. It should be noted, however, that Finland faces a similar challenge.<sup>38</sup>

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR ESTONIA, FINLAND, AND SWEDEN

One of the most topical examples of security cooperation between Estonia, Finland, and Sweden is their collaboration in responding to at least four cases of suspected sabotage and hybrid warfare against underwater critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea region since 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. The most recent incident occurred on Christmas Day 2024, when the Cook Islands-flagged, Russia-linked shadow fleet oil tanker *Eagle S* was suspected of dragging its anchor along the seabed, severing the Estlink 2 submarine electricity transmission cable between Finland and Estonia, along with other smaller cables.

The Finnish authorities demonstrated their readiness to act swiftly: the Finnish Police Special Intervention Unit *Karhu* and the Gulf of Finland Coast Guard Special Intervention Unit boarded the crewed vessel, seized it, and brought it to shore for what is likely to be a lengthy criminal investigation. The quick and coordinated response by the Finnish authorities highlighted Finland's intense, globally recognized inter-agency collaboration, built on both legal frameworks and the efficient use of the limited resources of individual agencies. In the aftermath of the incident, NATO Secretary General Rutte announced that NATO would enhance its presence in the Baltic Sea, particularly near underwater critical infrastructure, following a request from the Finnish and Estonian governments. The Swedish government also stepped up its surveillance of critical infrastructure, informing Finland and Estonia of its readiness to assist.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Kaja Kallas, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, announced that the European Commission would propose new sanctions against Russia's shadow fleet. The European Parliament has also called on EU coastal states to start verifying insurance certificates. In its November 2024 resolution, the Parliament proposed that the EU should place on its sanctions list all vessels operating in EU waters without adequate oil pollution insurance.<sup>40</sup>

39 Helsingin Sanomat 2024b.

40 Yle 2024b; European Parliament 2024b.

The previous similar incident occurred only about a month earlier in November 2024, when two telecom cables were severed: one between Finland and Germany, and the other between Sweden's Gotland Island and Lithuania. Furthermore, the preceding incident took place in October 2023, when the Balticconnector gas pipeline between Finland and Estonia, and two separate communication cables connecting Estonia, Finland, and Sweden were damaged. Both of these incidents are suspected to have been caused by Chinese vessels dragging an anchor along the seabed, as in the latest incident in December 2024. The series of incidents began in September 2022, when explosions damaged the Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream 2 gas pipelines between Russia and Germany. Both Russia and Ukraine have been blamed for the incident.

Estonia, Finland, and Sweden have worked closely responding to these incidents at both multilateral and bilateral levels with governments, authorities, and businesses. This cooperation includes joint investigation teams and Memoranda of Understanding, facilitating the exchange of information and expertise to investigate the incidents.<sup>41</sup> The countries have also jointly proposed additional investments to the EU and NATO in underwater communication cables at the European level to enhance the security and resilience of submarine infrastructure.<sup>42</sup> NATO is investing in innovative technologies to pre-emptively protect critical infrastructure, and in May 2024 NATO established its Critical Undersea Network and the Maritime Centre for Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure in London.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the joint exercise *Freezing Winds*, led by the

41 Yle 2023a; Euractiv 2024b; The Government Offices of Sweden 2024d; The Finnish Government 2024b.

42 See e.g., The Finnish Government 2023 and Politico 2024.

43 Reuters 2024.

- 44 NATO 2024d.
- 45 Yle 2023b.
- 46 Euractiv 2024c.
- 47 Estonia's equivalent organization, the Estonian Stockpiling Agency (AS Eesti Varude Keskus), was only established in 2021. Like its Finnish counterpart, it is a state-owned company responsible for the formation and management of a strategic stockpile.
- 48 The Finnish Government 2024c.
- 49 The Government Offices of Sweden 2024e.
- Finnish Navy in November 2024, provided NATO allies with an opportunity to practise responding to threats to critical underwater infrastructure.<sup>44</sup>
- Finland and Sweden's ties are now closer than ever, with expectations for further collaboration, from joint stockpiling<sup>45</sup> and storage of weapons and ammunition to Sweden's anticipated leadership of NATO's multinational Forward Land Forces (FLF) in the future Multi-Corps Land Component Command (MCLCC) in Eastern Finland.<sup>46</sup> In September 2024, the two countries signed their first cooperation agreement regarding comprehensive security of supply planning between the two nations, stepping up the cooperation in practice, for instance between Finland's National Emergency Supply Agency (NESA) and Sweden's MSB,<sup>47</sup> and updating a 1992 bilateral agreement on economic cooperation in times of international crisis.<sup>48</sup> According to both governments, this cooperation opens up opportunities for broader emergency supply collaboration with the other Nordic-Baltic nations and will also continue to complement EU and NATO Civil Defence capabilities. Additionally, in September 2024, the Finnish and Swedish governments held a joint meeting in Stockholm<sup>49</sup> with all key government ministers present – a historic event showcasing the ever-closer ties, with anticipation of more tangible cooperation efforts in different sectors relevant to political, cultural, economic and security areas.
- Since 2023, Finland and Estonia have strengthened cooperation on their eastern borders in response to rising tensions with Russia and shared security concerns as EU and NATO members. Both nations are constructing border fences with Russia to enhance the security of a border that serves as both an EU and a NATO border. Estonia aims to fence its entire 136-kilometre land border by the end of 2025, while Finland's barrier is set to cover 200 kilometres of its 1,340-kilometre land border in key areas by 2026.
- 50 European Commission 2024b.
- Border fencing has been reinforced by advanced surveillance. These measures address fears of Russian hybrid threat tactics, such as orchestrated migration or border incursions, and enhance border control, where the European Commission recently allocated an additional €50 million to Finland and €19.4 million to Estonia.<sup>50</sup> The collaboration includes and ensures policy alignment, resource sharing, and intelligence exchange, which are crucial for countries with security environments in the Baltic Sea and on NATO's eastern border.
- 51 Reuters 2023; ERR 2024.
- 52 Yle 2024; European Commission 2024b.
- While these actions demonstrate unity and bolster regional defence, they also come at a high financial cost, at least €380 million for Finland and €156 million for Estonia.<sup>51</sup> Ultimately, these measures highlight both countries' commitment to securing EU and NATO borders and maintaining regional stability in the face of evolving threats. The collective nature of Estonia's and Finland's actions, namely their significant efforts to safeguard the EU's external borders, has also been acknowledged at the EU's highest level, both in terms of resources and financial support.<sup>52</sup>
- 53 The working group discussions were held during the Nordic Security Dialogue event in Helsinki, Finland on 23 August 2023. The discussions centred on comprehensive security leadership and governance from the perspective of Finland, Sweden, and Estonia.
- In our working group discussions with leading experts from Estonia, Finland, and Sweden, it was acknowledged that Nordic cooperation has come a long way on both military and political levels, although operational planning remains limited. Moreover, joint Nordic-Baltic cooperation is still in its infancy, as traditional cooperation has largely been developed separately between the Nordic and Baltic countries. Operational cooperation could be enhanced by organizing semi-regular multilateral meetings between Nordic-Baltic national parliamentary committees (particularly those focusing on defence, foreign affairs, and internal security) to address topical regional issues. Existing Nordic security frameworks, such as the defence cooperation NORDEFECO and the civil protection cooperation Haga, could also be used to expand collaboration, enhance situational awareness, build personal relationships, and share best practices and research across the whole Nordic-Baltic region. In addition, the Nordic-Baltic economies of scale should be leveraged more effectively, including pooling military and civilian crisis preparedness procurement across the region and institutionalizing a process for cross-border procurement. New avenues for collaboration should also be pursued; for instance, companies could occasionally take the lead on certain issues and advise governments.<sup>53</sup>

# CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

Estonia, Finland, and Sweden, as small neighbours between the Arctic and the Baltic Sea, in the vicinity of an unpredictable Russia waging an all-out war of aggression in Ukraine, have been forced to invest in military defence and civilian preparedness on an unprecedented scale. The countries are among NATO's top performers in terms of national defence spending targets, with each country well above NATO's 2% of GDP target.<sup>54</sup>

The Nordic countries, in particular, are known for their whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to security and resilience. The Baltic states, in turn, have served as modern-day pioneers in sounding the alarm about Russia. Together, the Nordic-Baltic group has underscored the importance of comprehensive preparedness for a full range of threats, from traditional to emerging, such as climate change and hybrid warfare. For the Nordics and the Baltics, preparing for a full-scale war beyond Ukraine is realism and reality, not abstract war-mongering.

Strength lies in the integration of civil defence throughout society; Sweden has a robust industry (including in defence), a resilient civil society, and is a soft power giant in the Baltic Sea region. Finland, described as a leading "prepper nation",<sup>55</sup> has ingrained the notion of comprehensive security into its security policy for decades. Estonia, which unlike Finland and Sweden has experienced Soviet occupation, has resisted naivety towards Russia and authoritarian power politics, and has been able to overcome the limitations of its size through its agile and low-hierarchical governance and crisis management, as well as advanced cyber expertise.

The three Nordic-Baltic examples highlight different yet convergent approaches to security. These complementary strengths are reflected in the portfolios of members of von der Leyen's second European Commission. Estonia's Kaja Kallas serves as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, leading the EU's global diplomacy while coordinating foreign, security, and defence policies, with a focus on managing crisis responses and addressing key challenges such as Russia's aggression. Finland's Henna Virkkunen, as the EC's Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security, and Democracy, is responsible for enhancing the EU's digital autonomy, ensuring competitiveness, protecting democracy, and strengthening cybersecurity. The latest addition to the trio is Swedish Jessika Roswall, the European Commissioner for Environment, Water Resilience, and a Competitive Circular Economy. Her portfolio covers advancing the EU's environmental policies, improving water resilience, and promoting and developing the EU's bioeconomy.<sup>56</sup>

The all-hazards and all-threats emergency preparedness and complementary comprehensive security approaches of Estonia, Finland, and Sweden may serve as a timely basis for reinforcing and emphasizing societal resilience, civil-military cooperation and proactive crisis management. These approaches can significantly benefit the EU and NATO by providing scalable frameworks for addressing complex hybrid threats. The Nordic-Baltic focus on mobilizing both military and civilian resources, fostering public-private partnerships, enhancing digital and psychological resilience, and maintaining high levels of societal trust will ensure readiness to handle increasingly complex future crises.

54 Finland currently spends more than 2.4% of GDP on defence, Sweden 2.2% and Estonia 3.4%. All countries also plan to further increase their defence spending in the coming years (see e.g., NATO 2024c).

55 The New York Times 2020.

56 The remaining Nordic-Baltic European Commissioners in the von der Leyen Commission 2024-2029 include Commissioners with portfolios important for comprehensive security issues: Lithuanian Commissioner Andrius Kubilius, in charge of Defence and Space; Latvian Commissioner Valdis Dombrovskis, in charge of Economy and Productivity; and Danish Commissioner Dan Jørgensen, in charge of Energy.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Whole-of-government and whole-of-society security concepts provide EU-NATO cooperation with a comprehensive civil-military approach to respond to cross-border crises that affect societies at large.
- In a deteriorating European security environment, the multi-lateral and hands-on expertise of Estonia, Finland, and Sweden can serve as a draft playbook for organizing European security cooperation to meet the minimum standards of a comprehensive security union.
- While upping defence spending is crucial for countering the Russian threat and building a credible self-defence capability and strategic autonomy, European nations have to invest in civil defence and preparedness accordingly. This includes physical endeavours, such as building and maintaining stockpiles and shelters, but also advancing training and education initiatives and strategic communication to strengthen psychological resilience.
- In a crisis, people seldom rise to the occasion, but rather fall to the level of their training. Estonia, Finland, and Sweden are not omniscient when it comes to comprehensive security, but in matters of developing actual planning capabilities and taking robust measures to counter malicious external influence or activities, they have capabilities that other EU and NATO countries can draw inspiration from when modelling activities or policies.
- Finland's expertise lies in its advanced comprehensive security concept and its wide-ranging civil preparedness and security of supply planning, which involve businesses, non-governmental organizations and citizens to ensure the crisis preparedness of society. In turn, Sweden's key assets are its reformist and consensus-oriented security mindset and its state-invested, export-driven security and defence industry. Estonia has the advantage of agile and straightforward crisis management and society-wide cyber expertise, which would add significant value to enhanced EU-NATO cooperation.

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