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Finnish metanoia and NATO[Visit the WEBSITE](#)[Receive the E-NEWSLETTER](#)*Finnish metanoia and NATO**Abstract:*

Since the beginning of the Cold War, Finns have been satisfied with their policy of neutrality and non-alignment. Over the past thirty-three years, opinion polls have shown a consistent public rejection of NATO membership, even more so than in neighbouring Sweden.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought about a radical and rapid change of mentality in Finland. The Russian war of aggression and its horrors have completely transformed public, public opinion and political party perceptions. As a result, there has been a radical change in the ends and means by which the country's foreign, security and defence policy should be conducted.

Finland's metanoia is the consequence of a revelation, associated with the invasion of Ukraine, that the loss of the past can be assumed in order to gain guarantees for dealing with the decisive issues of the nation's continuity, security and defence. The result is inevitably an accelerated rapprochement with NATO, with the aim of NATO membership. Finland is convinced that more security means less risk. The security dilemma says that sometimes the opposite is true. The spiral response exists.

Keywords:

NATO, Finland, Ukraine war, public opinion, Russia, neutrality, security dilemma.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

La metanoia finlandesa y la OTAN

Resumen:

Desde el comienzo de la guerra fría los finlandeses se han sentido satisfechos con su política de neutralidad y no alineamiento. En los últimos treinta y tres años, las encuestas de opinión han recogido un constante rechazo de la población al ingreso en la OTAN, mayor incluso que el de la vecina Suecia. La invasión de Ucrania ha provocado un cambio radical y rápido de mentalidad en Finlandia. La guerra de agresión rusa y sus horrores han transformado completamente la percepción de la opinión pública, la publicada y de los partidos políticos. Consecuentemente, se ha producido un cambio radical respecto a los fines y medios más convenientes para ordenar la política exterior, de seguridad y defensa del país.

La metanoia finlandesas es consecuencia de una revelación, asociada a la invasión de Ucrania, que permite asumir la pérdida del pasado para ganar garantías a la hora de enfrentar las cuestiones decisivas de la continuidad, seguridad y defensa de la nación. El resultado es inevitablemente un acelerado acercamiento a la OTAN, con el propósito de integrarse en la Alianza. Finlandia está convencida de que más seguridades suponen menores riesgos. El dilema de la seguridad dice que a veces es lo contrario. La respuesta espiral existe.

Palabras clave:

OTAN, Finlandia, guerra de Ucrania, Rusia, neutralidad, dilema de seguridad.

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Introduction

On 15 May, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö and Prime Minister Sanna Marin announced at a press conference that Finland intended to join NATO. An experienced politician from the liberal National Coalition (KOK) party in his second term in office and a young prime minister from the Social Democratic Party of Finland (SDP) were turning around the foreign, security and defence policy their country had been pursuing since the end of World War II.

According to the government statement, the president and the ministerial committee on foreign policy and security finalised the report on Finland's NATO membership in the morning. The council of state and the full cabinet would then approve it for submission to parliament the following day.¹

The date was well chosen. That Sunday was Memorial Day for those who fell in the 1918 civil war, the war against the USSR and the subsequent war against National Socialist Germany. The president had begun the morning by visiting the graves of the fallen soldiers and ended the afternoon by announcing that Finland was experiencing a historic day.

The 2000 constitution establishes a parliamentary system in Finland, breaking away from the traditional semi-presidential model. However, the Head of State retains important powers. The president's powers in foreign affairs and defence, where he exercises command as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, are particularly important. A veteran Liberal in the presidency side by side with a very young Social Democrat as prime minister of a coalition cabinet does not seem to be the best political scenario to undertake major changes in Finland's foreign and defence policy.

The cabinet headed by Sanna Marin has ministers from five political parties - the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Green League, the Left Alliance and the Swedish People's Party of Finland - and is expected to have a comfortable majority in parliament. In opposition are the President's party, the National Coalition, and the Finns Party. The Centre Party with six ministers, the same as the SDP, and the vice-presidency is a swing party that in the previous legislature governed with the Liberals of the National Coalition Party.

¹ <https://yle.fi/news/3-12446441>

Leading a cabinet with ministers from five parties is not easy, especially when there are significant differences between them. The political spectrum behind the cabinet ranges from communists to liberals and agrarians to environmentalists. Being only 36 years old does not make the mission any easier.

However, this political landscape has completely reshaped Finland's position in the world. The country's customary neutrality and military non-alignment has become history. The Finnish parliament voted on the NATO accession proposal the day after it was announced on 16 May. All Finnish political forces supported the resolution. The result was clearly in favour with 188 MPs voting in favour, eight against and four abstaining. Neighbouring Sweden has not yet achieved full agreement between all political forces. Sweden's environmentalists and communists, with just over 10 per cent of seats, have expressed their opposition to NATO membership.² However, on 16 May, Sweden made its intention to join the Alliance official.

Sudden change in public opinion in Finland.

In the space of a few months, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought about a complete reversal of Finland's traditional foreign and security policy. Public opinion is usually more stable and carries more inertia than published or political class opinions. In the case of Finland, in the face of the new security situation brought about by the war in Ukraine, citizenry has moved even faster than the elites.

Finns have for decades expressed a high degree of identification with their country's foreign policy in polls. Three out of four Finns were either very much in favour or in favour of the direction of the policy of neutrality. SPD and Left Alliance voters were the most satisfied, exceeding or approaching 90 per cent support for neutrality and non-alignment. The most critical were respondents who identify with the right-wing Finns Party.³ Some opposition to a complete modification of the principles that established the country's relationship with the rest of the world was therefore to be expected.

Data from opinion polls conducted by the Finnish Ministry of Defence provide information on the evolution of the population on various issues. At this point, it may be of particular

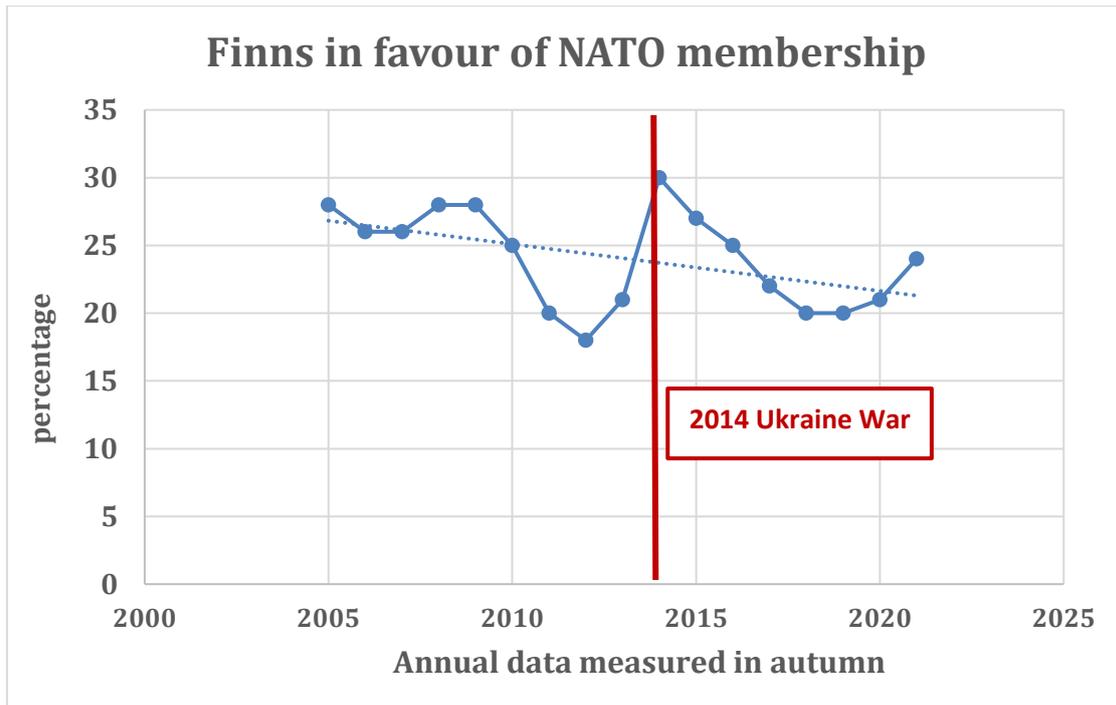
² <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20220515/8268129/finlandia-otan-tratado-ingreso-gerra-ucrania.html>

³The Advisory Board for Defence Information, ABDI (MTS) 'Finns' Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, National Defence and Security'. Ministry of Defence, Helsinki December 2021

Ninety-two per cent of SDP supporters think that foreign policy is well managed, as do 87% of Left Alliance supporters, 77% of Centre Party supporters and 74% of Coalition Party and Green Party supporters. Fifty-six per cent of Finns Party supporters think that Finnish foreign policy is poorly managed. Available at:

<https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/163630>

interest to consider the extent to which there has been a reversal of the position expressed over the years. Stable results accumulated over a long period of time have been changed by the psychological impact on the population caused by the media's reporting and opinion on the war in Ukraine. The graph shows past results to the question: 'In your opinion, should Finland promote NATO membership?' ⁴



Source: Ministry of Defence Finland, prepared internally. Available at:

<https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/163630>

The graph shows the evolution from 2005 to the end of 2021. We see that opinion is fairly stable within the range of 20 to 30 percent. It should come as no surprise that it was precisely in 2014, just after the outbreak of war in Ukraine as a result of the Maidan revolution, that approval for NATO membership reached its highest level of support. Nevertheless, even at times of heightened uncertainty, only one in three Finns was in favour of NATO membership.

Data provided by the Ministry of Defence are not substantially different from those of the Finnish Business and Policy Forum (EVA). In its annual foreign and security policy survey, EVA finds that in 2021 one in four Finns supported Alliance membership.⁵

⁴In your opinion, should Finland seek membership in Nato?

⁵ <https://www.eva.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/eva-analysi-no-104.pdf>

On 2 February 2022, the Wilson Center⁶ published a prospective article on Finland and Sweden's possible NATO membership. The conclusion of the analysis was clear. Despite tensions between Russia and Ukraine, neither country will be interested in full NATO membership.⁷ The two fundamental reasons for sustaining the continued neutral status of the two Scandinavian states were mutual interest in sustaining the precarious balance of power in the region and the insufficient popular base of support for the decision.

However, the analysis published by the Wilson Center left open a door that could change all its estimates. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, by disrupting stability in the area, would validate the membership option by abruptly eliminating the rationale for maintaining neutrality. In the event of open war in Ukraine, the possible application for membership was anticipated to be joint by the two countries. The accurate analysis did not assess how public opinion would react, which as on many occasions could be reticent about such a substantial shift in position and role on the international stage.

However, possible doubts about popular support have been dispelled in a short time. In just a few weeks, the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has simultaneously altered the stance of both the political class and citizens in Finland. Opinion in Finland on NATO membership has changed in a very short time.

The psychological earthquake that the Ukrainian war has provoked in the EU has changed many perceptions and judgements. Displacement has been particularly pronounced in Finland and the fact that it shares a long border of 1,300 kilometres with the Russian Federation may explain this. Another reason that has emerged is the historical memory of the Winter War and the Continuation War against the USSR during World War II. During those hard times for Finland, the country found itself alone in the face of an oppressive and overwhelmingly superior military power.

Neighbouring Sweden has in the past maintained a more pro-NATO position than Finland. Both Nordic countries are governed by social democrats. The two social democratic

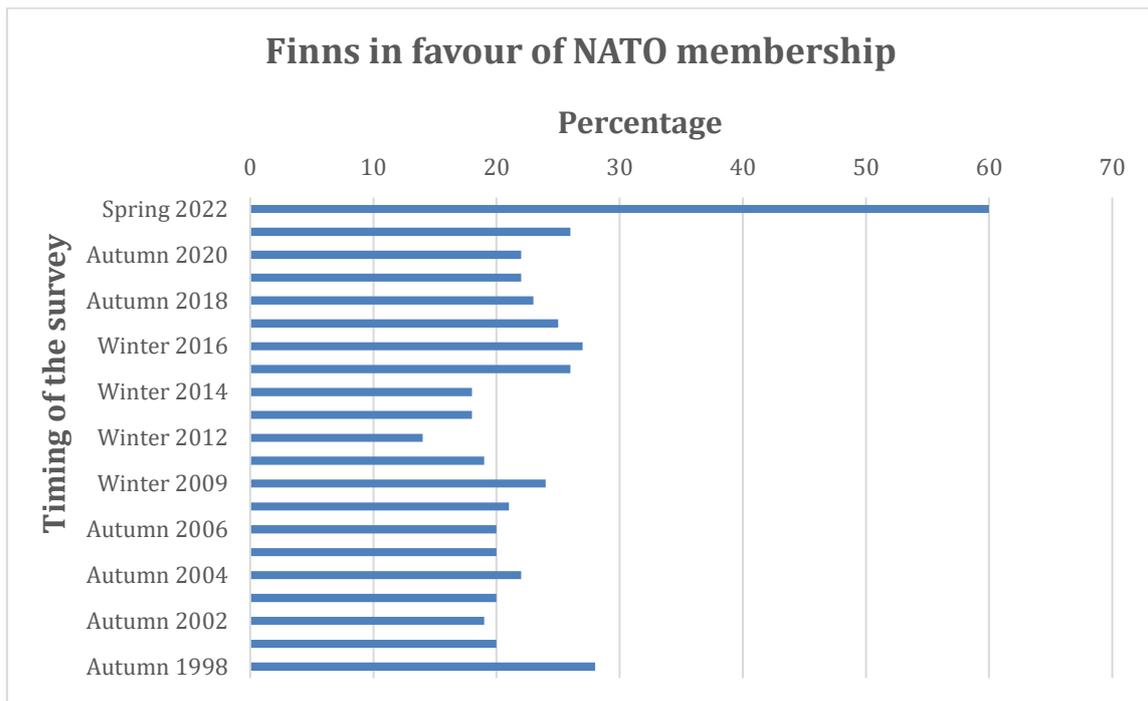
⁶ The Wilson Center is one of the most prestigious Think Tanks in the world. In 2020, in its annual ranking of the world's Think Tanks, the University of Pennsylvania ranked the Wilson Center tenth out of a total of 11,175 think tanks around the globe.

⁷ These reports concluded that NATO membership would not be advantageous to either country as it would disrupt the precarious balance of power in the region. It is most likely that there will be no dramatic change in the relationship between Finland, Sweden, and NATO, despite the current escalation in tensions over Ukraine. Russia will continue its aggressive foreign policy, meddling in other countries' elections, cyberspace, and even conducting or threatening hybrid warfare. Incursions in Swedish and Finnish airspace and waterways will likely continue, which may stoke further support of NATO. The threat of invasion of Ukraine might further drive Finland and Sweden to deepen NATO cooperation, but to avoid antagonizing Russia and without widespread public support for membership, the two may ultimately decide to never join the alliance.' Available at:

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/sisters-not-twins-prospects-finland-and-swedens-nato-accession>

parties have maintained a position against NATO membership. However, Nordic Social Democracy in government, together with other parties on the left, right and centre, have quietly adopted a political repositioning that was unthinkable at the beginning of the year. Tuomas Forsberg, director of the University of Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, like most experts, thought that Sweden would take the first step towards NATO, after which the Finnish government would begin to change its position and, once internally consolidated in the cabinet, modulate public opinion. The facts have confirmed that the experts' forecasts were wrong. Finnish public opinion has been the first to move; the spearhead pointing in the direction of change.⁸

Polls conducted three weeks after the invasion pointed to a qualitative leap in public opinion. While in autumn 2021 only one in four Finns supported membership, by early March 2022 three out of five Finns were in favour of joining the Alliance.



Source: Finnish Business and Policy Forum, EVA's Values and Attitudes Survey. Prepared internally, Available at:

<https://www.eva.fi/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/eva-analyysi-no-104.pdf>

Yleisradio, Finland's public broadcasting company, has also published its opinion polls in its online newspaper. Data shown by the public broadcaster follow the same trend shown

⁸ <https://nationworldnews.com/why-the-finns-once-the-skeptics-of-nato-are-ready-to-embrace-the-coalition/>

above but go further back in time. The evolution marks a rapid shift and an increased slope of rising opinion. According to Yle, in February, Finnish support for NATO was just over half of those polled; in March it was over three to five; and in May it rose to over 75 percent, three out of four.⁹ In six months, there has been a three-fold increase in the number of people in favour of joining the Atlantic Alliance.

Causes for the change in mentality

Salonius-Pasternak, a security analyst at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, recently noted that "no one I know could remotely think of a similar moment in Finnish history when public opinion has changed so quickly, so radically".¹⁰

It would be extremely interesting to analyse the causes that have influenced such a drastic and accelerated alteration in the Finns' foreign, security and defence policy preferences. Assessing the threat that Russia currently poses to Finland would inevitably be necessary. It is quite possible that the Finns understand that in May 2022, despite the failure of the Russian 'special military operation' in Ukraine, the danger of aggression from the east will be greater than after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, regardless of the objective judgement that can be drawn from an analysis of the scenarios then and now. The Finns' strategic metanoia could also be related to a transformation of the collective psyche that seeks healing from within, spontaneously trying to resolve the conflict provoked by a position of neutrality in the face of the horror of Russian aggression against Ukraine. From a psychological perspective, the process would be a fundamental and stable shift in the orientation of Finns' political aspirations away from the discursive structure of their neutrality in favour of adapting to a more consistent engagement with the background of the country's political consciousness.

Finland's old strategic metanoia is a dying to be reborn new. It means leaving behind its principles, aims, priorities and links to identify with others, which completely renews the ability to perceive and understand Finland's position, vocation and identity in the world. The transformation is the consequence of a revelation, associated with the Russian-initiated war in Ukraine, which allows us to take the advantage of losing the past in order

⁹ <https://yle.fi/news/3-12437506>

¹⁰ "No one I know can think of anything remotely similar in Finnish history where public opinion has changed so quickly, so radically," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/21/there-will-be-no-way-back-will-war-change-finlands-pragmatic-approach-to-russia>

to learn to be better able to deal with the decisive issues of the nation's continuity, security and defence.

Assessing the level of threat and risk that Russia poses to Finland today is a controversial issue, which could have opened up a protracted strategic policy debate. Clearly, Finland is not and does not look like Ukraine. However, there has been no contentious exchange of views. A new wind has suddenly blown over the tree tops with a different scent, unexpectedly fascinating everyone from the very first moment. Finland's place in the world is no longer where it has been for decades. The landscape of the world for Finland is no longer business as usual. In just a few weeks, without political wrangling and without any altercation, Finland's strategic landscape has changed fundamentally. The new coordinates are a consequence of a change in the nature of the protagonist country.

From another perspective, NATO membership for Finland and Sweden alters security balances across Europe. Consequently, the new situation entails a shift in priorities and a very narrow polarisation on the overriding issue, the perception of danger in the East. The Alliance's centre of gravity shifts east and north. The Mediterranean, North Africa and the Balkans are becoming less relevant.

Russia would lose control of the strategic Gulf of Finland. NATO would have full control of shipping in the Gulf, allowing it to block access from the ports of Saint Petersburg and Primorsk to the Baltic, while closing channels from the Volga to the Baltic and from the White Sea to the Baltic, which flow into the Neva River.¹¹ Sweden's NATO membership would also allow the use of military facilities on the island of Gotland, further facilitating control of the Baltic.

On the other hand, Russia would double its border with the Alliance. It is therefore not surprising that Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that "the new situation obliges Russia to take military-technical and other countermeasures in order to counter emerging threats to its national security".¹² Dimitri Medvedev, deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, expressed a more worrying view that "there can no longer be talk of a nuclear-weapon-free state for the Baltic".¹³ Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu has stated that "the situation in the western strategic zone is characterised by an increase in

¹¹ Saint Petersburg and Primorsk are Russia's second and fifth largest ports. <https://www.marineinsight.com/know-more/7-major-ports-in-russia/?nowprocket=1>

¹² <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-05-13/rusia-lanza-a-finlandia-la-misma-amenaza-que-vertio-putin-contra-ucrania-al-acercarse-a-la-otan.html>

¹³ <https://www.france24.com/es/video/20220414-mosc%C3%BA-lanz%C3%B3-amenaza-nuclear-en-el-b%C3%A1ltico-por-posible-uni%C3%B3n-de-suecia-y-finlandia-a-la-otan>

military threats near Russia's borders", which will result in the creation of 12 new military units on the border with NATO before the end of the year.¹⁴

However, without the need for internal debate among allies, NATO has immediately declared that its doors remain open to the accession of the two Nordic countries. The change of mentality in Finland and Sweden towards NATO also entails a change in the mentality of the Alliance and its members, which will have advantages for some and high costs for others. The timing and urgency, in the midst of an unfinished and possibly protracted war, heralds a geopolitical and geoeconomic repositioning that has not had time to be calmly assessed by all states. The reluctance of Turkey and Croatia does not seem to weigh heavily. The accession of Finland and Sweden seems to be a sudden *fait accompli*, which, with the defence assurances offered by the UK, impose an accelerated timetable for membership.

The rapid general change of mindset, not only in Scandinavia, associated with an energy crisis in Europe with serious effects that are difficult to assess, has been adopted without the usual exchanges of opinion and negotiations in NATO and Europe. The coalition of wills has been automatic and general. Kissinger would not have had to reach for Europe's phone on this occasion. There must be some explanation for this unexpected development, and possibly the total harmony of the usually discordant allies has much to do with decisions taken in Moscow but also in Washington.¹⁵

Without a war of aggression, without the continued attacks on civilians, without the destruction of European cities, without the death of innocents, without the exodus of millions of Ukrainians, without the images of horror broadcast by the media and networks, without the war crimes, without the disparity of forces at play, without Ukraine's heroic resistance, without the role played by President Zelensky and without the resounding failure of the Russian armed forces, it might not have been so easy to reach unanimity on NATO membership in Finland and Sweden. This is certainly the case, but we do not know how much Scandinavia has been influenced by the speed and consistency of the

¹⁴ <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20220520/8280827/rusia-shoigu-12-nuevas-unidades-militares-amenaza-otan-finlandia-suecia.html>

¹⁵ In March, the US House of Representatives approved a \$13.6 billion aid package for Ukraine, of which some \$6.5 billion is earmarked for military support to the Ukrainian resistance. Added to these amounts are the more than 2.7 billion in military aid granted by Washington since 2014.

<https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-03-10/el-congreso-de-estados-unidos-aprueba-ayudas-de-13600-millones-de-dolares-a-ucrania.html>

In May, the US Congress again approved a further \$40 billion in aid to Ukraine, much of it for military purposes.

<https://www.france24.com/es/minuto-a-minuto/20220519-el-congreso-de-eeuu-aprueba-nueva-ayuda-de-usd-40-000-millones-para-ucrania>

unanimous agreement of NATO and EU countries in their forceful response to reject the invasion, backed up by severe sanctions on Russia, sending humanitarian aid and weapons to Ukraine, and the US commitment to maintain the financial assistance needed to sustain military resistance against Russia.

Finland's neutrality and active defence

Neutrality and non-alignment do not mean disinterest in national defence. Standing alone, outside an allied umbrella, may require greater commitment and effort to uphold sovereignty and independence. States that choose to remain outside an alliance that provides for their security needs know that in case of danger they may be on their own. Finland and Sweden have demonstrated their willingness to address the risks of neutrality. The Swedish defence industry is one of the most competitive and comprehensive in the EU. Finland continues to maintain the conscription model and has the largest reserves available for mobilisation in the world as a proportion of the population: one in seven Finns is a reservist.¹⁶

Finland is also known for its well-developed system for protecting civilians against aggression. Civil defence has some 54,000 reinforced concrete shelters with a total capacity of 4.4 million people. Helsinki alone, a city of 650,000 inhabitants, has shelters for almost one million people. Another notable aspect of its defence system is the stockpiling of key goods and resources ready for use in the event of war, many of them protected in the shelters. Regulated by law, there are medicines and food reserves to sustain the entire population for a period ranging from three to ten months in times of emergency.

The Finnish model might seem inconsistent from our perspective, but support for conscription - 73 percent of the population - probably invites us to reconsider our initial assessment. Support for citizens' personal involvement in the defence of the country through military and reserve service has been consolidated over time in Finland.

Analysing a single question may be sufficient to understand commitment to the defence of the nation. If Finland were attacked, should Finns, in your opinion, take up arms to

¹⁶ <https://www.newtral.es/finlandia-otan-frontera-rusia/20220419/>

It is also the fourth country in the world with the most reservists. In total, 900,000 people would be ready for service at any given time, according to figures from Global Fire Power (GFP), a number second only to Taiwan, Brazil and India. <https://www.globalfirepower.com/active-reserve-military-manpower.php>

defend themselves in all situations, even if the outcome seemed uncertain?¹⁷ The key to this question is 'even if the outcome seemed uncertain'. More than three out of four men said yes, they should fight even if the result could be defeat. More than half of the women felt the same way.

Moreover, when the question is no longer generic to all Finns and instead focuses on personal willingness to participate in the defence of the country, data are even more favourable. Eighty-four percent of Finns say they are prepared to defend Finland.¹⁸ Data is from autumn 2021 when the majority of the population still rejected NATO membership. Finland's population is willing to take up arms to defend itself against aggression.¹⁹

Ukraine has also shown itself ready to resist. The price of the decision to oppose Russia's aims is proving very high and the outcome is uncertain. Finland has understood that it is safer to change its status. The problem with NATO membership is that Russia may feel trapped by the famous security dilemma. An increase in the security of Scandinavian countries may mean an increase in Russia's insecurity as Russia is a country affected by a special obsession with security, which is surely easy to understand knowing its harsh history marked by continuous invasions.

Strategic logic is paradoxical, said Edward Luttwak. The security dilemma is of course paradoxical. The more you increase your security, the more sensitive the potential adversary is to consider the need to respond with some kind of action that multiplies the danger of escalation. More security may mean more risk but we do not seem to be living in a time for strategic finesse, emotions move the world very fast.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian experience has shown Finns that resisting Russian aggression, defending national territory, means taking many losses, including the destruction of cities, infrastructure, industry and, of course, the lives and health of many soldiers and civilians. Moreover, as a neutral country, Ukraine has not been able to count on full Alliance coverage, a situation that has weakened deterrence and subsequently forced Kiev to resist without the combat capability that NATO can mobilise.

¹⁷ 'If Finland were attacked, should Finns, in your opinion, take up arms to defend themselves in all situations, even if the outcome seemed uncertain?'

¹⁸ 'If Finland were attacked, would you be prepared to participate in the various tasks of national defence according to your abilities and skills?'

¹⁹ <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/163630>

Reading the facts seems clear. Neutrality does not guarantee peace and forces a country to face aggression alone, even if it receives arms and intelligence support from abroad. The rapid and unforeseen drastic shift in public opinion in Finland and Sweden has been surprising. It has taken place without an in-depth and wide-ranging debate that would favour a change in preferences. The emotions provoked by the war in Ukraine are a necessary component in understanding the complete turnaround in Finland's and Sweden's foreign, security and defence policies.

Unfortunately, greater security does not always mean less risk. "The entire realm of strategy is pervaded by a paradoxical logic of its own, standing against the ordinary linear logic".²⁰

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²⁰ LUTTWAK, Edward (2005) *Para Bellum: Estrategia de la paz y de la guerra*, Siglo XXI, Madrid.