

# Impact of the Global COVID-19 Pandemic on Finnish Views of Security

By Charly Salonijs-Pasternak

When Finnish authorities began meetings focused on the potential spread of COVID-19 in January 2020 they were still hoping that the outbreak would be contained abroad. The first confirmed case in Finland came on January 29, through a Chinese tourist visiting Lapland. In his speech to open Parliament on February 2 Finnish President Sauli Niinistö said the possibility of a global pandemic could not be discounted, and that global cooperation and national preparations were key. He noted that the low threshold for cross-authority cooperation and information sharing among Finnish authorities was a key strength. COVID-19 would ultimately expose this as not being entirely correct. The pandemic also made it clear that Finland's comprehensive societal security concept is mainly focused on preparations for foreseen events, but has fewer provisions for operative management of dynamic crises, and unless it is a military crisis, no other authorities have the wherewithal or resources to manage a long-running society-wide emergency-crisis situation.

Despite these and many other lessons that have been identified, Finns generally see that the country has weathered the global pandemic better than most. The direct health impact of COVID-19 has been relatively small. As of mid-June 2021, 53 percent of Finland's population of 5.5 million had been partially vaccinated, while the total number of COVID-19 related deaths was around 970, out of some 95,000 infections. In terms of societal impact, studies indicate similar trends as elsewhere, with societal isolation and increasing mental health issues causing concern. The economic cost has been smaller than initially predicted, partially due to the government taking on nearly €20 billion more debt in 2020 to cover the planned annual budget of €58 billion. While economic growth is predicted to be in the 2 to 3 percent range due to increasing global economic activity, Finland's debt-to-GDP ratio will continue to increase, having hit 70 percent in 2020 (up from 60 percent in 2019). The above relatively good numbers, combined with other societal and geographic factors (low population density) and Finland's relatively mild restrictions—with no complete “lock-downs”—have combined to ensure continued support of the government's corona actions by the majority of the population.<sup>1</sup>

It is tempting to suggest that Finland's views on security alignments, partnerships and cooperation, the military, or global power dynamics did not change, because the global pandemic did not have a catastrophic

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societal impact. This is possible, but a more likely answer can be found in how Finland viewed those security related issues prior to the global pandemic.

## Finland's Approach to Security

Finland's approach to security is conditioned by history and a strong sense of geostrategic isolation. Finland is small, not 'top-of-mind' for politicians of large countries, not geographically centrally located, and effectively an island (majority of trade is seaborne).

Therefore, Finnish thinking on security has evolved to be comprehensive, while military defense is almost single-mindedly focused on deterring potential threats or the use of military force by Russia.<sup>2</sup> Society-wide national preparedness is thus seen as critical for improving resilience and national survival irrespective of the nature of a threat.<sup>3</sup>

The key components of Finland's external national security policy have traditionally been seen as diplomacy and defense. These are used to impact four overlapping spheres that contribute to Finnish security, described by Finnish President Niinistö as (1) global rules-based order, (2) international cooperation, (3) functional relationship with Russia, and (4) credible national defense capability.

A credible national defense capability is viewed as a foundation of national security. Based on mandatory military service (for men) with a combination of volume provided by extensive reserves and cutting-edge military capabilities, Finnish defense is best viewed as an integrated system that is woven into the cloth of society. A functional relationship with Russia refers to both practical daily cooperation and high-level political dialogue. The 1,340-km shared border means that small practical issues must be dealt with on a daily basis, and generally such cooperation at the administrative level works. At the political level, the presidents of the two countries speak when needed and have traditionally met once or twice per year to discuss bilateral and

international issues. In the security realm, international cooperation refers primarily to cooperation within the European Union (EU), with NATO, and other bi- and multilateral cooperation efforts with Sweden, the Nordics, and other European states, as well as the United States. The global, rules-based order generally refers to the post-World War II system with the UN and other international organizations and institutions, and associated norms and legal frameworks that guide and limit state power to encourage cooperation and dialogue. Fundamental to the idea is that great powers willingly limit their actions to encourage others to also refrain from actions that cause harm more broadly (such as war). The United States is seen as the original and necessary backbone of the existing global rules-based order, together with other predominantly democratic small and medium powers, and increasingly also the European Union.

The above four-pillar structure is, however, largely only relevant for the external portion of national security. Due to experiences dating back to World War II, Finland has continued to embrace and refine what is frequently called "Total Defence," but which in the 21st century might be more accurately described as "Comprehensive Societal Security" (CSS). In Finland, CSS is structured around the idea of seven critical functions of society, which must continue irrespective of whether a crisis is man-made or natural. Each of the seven functions includes numerous sub-functions, with associated responsible authorities. Where functions require cooperation by multiple actors, the lead authority is responsible for coordination, as well as the creation of strategies to aid in planning and preparation. Of note is the fact that in only one of the seven functions—national defense—does the military play a central role.<sup>4</sup>

Finland's approach to security does recognize the need to prepare for pandemics. In 2006, the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

published a national plan for addressing a flu pandemic, which was updated in 2012. A national preparatory pandemic coordination body started work in 2009 but was closed in the summer of 2019. The need to update such relevant laws as the Communicable Diseases Act of 2016 and Emergency Powers Act of 2011 had also been identified, but work had not progressed, because addressing and preparing for pandemics competed with a host of other identified security threats, including more traditional ones.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, while preparations were nowhere near expectations when it came time to activate Finnish pandemic plans, the idea that a pandemic could impact Finnish security was not new.

Against this background, it is not surprising that views on Finnish national security, what contributes to it and how it is enhanced, have not changed dramatically due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has, however, served as a concrete reminder of what a globally connected economy means and how its resilience can be shaken, as well as the benefits that small states can accrue from belonging to larger groupings such as the European Union. Challenges in dealing with the pandemic itself, as well as the resulting societal impacts, have resulted in a long list of lessons identified, some which have already been implemented with a view to better preparedness during future crises.

### The Domestic Dimension

The early statements of Finnish authorities and the President's early observations regarding COVID-19 were mostly ignored by the public at large. The government received an eye-opening briefing on the potential spread of the disease on February 26, and a COVID-19 coordination group was established. However, public comments by ministers remained soothing in nature. By early March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had entered the public general consciousness. The pandemic's spread was covered

by national media and appeared in public comments by individual politicians, but the public at large treated it as something that, like SARS or Ebola, was unlikely to touch them personally.



"People on the Helsinki railway station with face masks and without them." (Photo by T. Miettinen, Helsinki, Finland, August 15, 2020)

This sense of Finland somehow being protected from the spread of COVID-19 and therefore not requiring dramatic actions was evident as late as March 8, when Prime Minister Sanna Marin said Finland was not going to engage in "public spectacles" like those being witnessed in Italy at the time, in reference to testing temperatures at ports of entry. However, on the same day President Niinistö penned a blogpost in which he urged politicians and citizens to take the virus seriously. The attitudes of the Prime Minister and President are relevant because in Finland both must agree for a state of emergency to be declared. Demand for more forceful actions increased, as did the ominousness of signals about the spread of the virus in Finland.

On March 13 the Ministerial Committee on Foreign and Security Policy (known as TP-UTVA in Finland and comprising the President and a sub-section of government ministers) discussed

the Emergency Powers Act and agreed that a state of emergency existed. Based on preparatory work by the Ministry of Justice, the weekend was spent preparing for Monday March 16, when some powers listed in the Emergency Powers Act were activated.<sup>6</sup>

The turnaround speed from “move along, nothing to see here” to the first post-World War II declaration of a state of emergency and activation of the Emergency Powers Act was astonishing and emphasized the magnitude and velocity of the crisis. A raft of restrictions regarding schools, closure of public spaces, restricting meetings to 10 individuals, forcing health care services personnel to limit holidays, encouraging distance work, and closing national borders were introduced. Perhaps the most historic restriction came on March 28, when the large Uusimaa region that includes the capital Helsinki was isolated from the rest of the country. Until April 15 only specifically delimited movement across the regional border was allowed. Besides being a historic decision to limit a core constitutional right, the isolation of Uusimaa is of interest because it was ultimately the major contribution by the Finnish Defence Forces to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland.

General societal features and government actions resulted in the first wave of the pandemic being largely suppressed by mid-to-late summer 2020, with comparatively few restrictions remaining after that. The government also discontinued the use of the Emergency Powers Act in mid-June.

The second wave struck in the fall, followed by the arrival of mutated strains, causing the government to increase restrictions and reactivate specific clauses and powers of the Emergency Powers Act, while tightening restrictions on social gatherings to a maximum of between 6 and 10, depending on the circumstances.

In practice, if in the spring of 2020 everyone was urged to spend holidays by themselves or with the people they lived with, and the summer had

enabled large weddings, by the 2020 Christmas season the government again urged that celebrations be limited to just a handful of individuals. The third wave in late winter 2021 surprised many, and municipal elections slated for mid-April 2021 were ultimately moved due to scenarios which caused officials to fear that safe elections could not be held. With increasing concern over new strains of the virus and a vaccination schedule which would not achieve herd-immunity until the fall of 2021, Finnish authorities continued to message that if individuals did not contribute to the whole by continuing to follow safety procedures, yet another summer might be “lost” due to stricter restrictions. By early summer 2021, many restrictions had been discontinued and a return to relative normalcy was generally expected by early winter, but officials warned of the effects that strains able to sidestep vaccinations could cause.

### **The Role of the Military in the Finnish Response to COVID-19**

The Finnish Defence Forces (FDF) ultimately did not play a large role in Finland’s 2020 and 2021 response to COVID-19. It assisted other authorities in a few limited ways but largely focused on ensuring it could safely continue training and ensure operational readiness. This approach was in accordance with Finland’s general approach, where individual and independent authorities frequently cooperate and support each other but are expected to and legally only allowed to lead when a matter concerns their area of competence.

To the public, the main contribution of the Finnish Defence Forces to the national COVID-19 response was to assist the police in the isolation of the Uusimaa region. The FDF contributed some 800 unarmed conscripts and cadre soldiers to aid the police at road stops. This occurred within the regular framework of support to other national authorities, one of the core tasks of the FDF.

Another public contribution to the national COVID-19 effort was to work with research institutions and the private sector to develop a containerized PPE-cleaning solution. The FDF expertise and technologies for this had been developed for other purposes, and it was thought to provide a stop-gap solution to the PPE shortage that was particularly acute in the first half of 2020. The process and containerization were found to work and have now been stored in case of a future shortage of PPE. In May 2021, the FDF continued efforts with other Finnish authorities by exploring how other single-use plastic health care material could be cleaned at industrial scale. Other support to authorities included assisting the National Institute of Health with individual experts and some equipment from military stores, as well as the border guard with operational mobility.

Within the FDF, the explicit goal from early March 2020 onwards has been to be able to continue critical training operations and ensure the virus does not spread in a way that would compromise readiness or the chain of command. The first infections among conscript and cadre were identified on March 13, 2020. On the same day a new training and leave process was announced, which had been planned in 72 hours, a reminder of the benefits of a hierarchical organizational structure with significant planning experience, processes, and resources. The new approach to conscript training involved dividing conscripts and their training officers into three groups which rotated, so as not to be in contact with each other. One was on leave, another training in the barracks, and the third exercising in the forests. This system clearly changed the experience for many of the 40,000-plus conscripts that will have been trained during 2020 and 2021. However, large changes in the overall training system, which were rolled out earlier in 2019-2020, may have mitigated some of the potential negative impacts that COVID-19 had on conscript training. Internal numbers

indicate that conscripts have adjusted well, and grades given by conscripts to various aspects of their time in service have remained high (4+ on a scale of 1 to 5).

Also impacted from March 2020 onwards was reservist training, which was frozen, then temporarily partly reactivated during autumn 2020. Other actions by the FDF to mitigate risk were increased freedom for distance work, with many being able to work 2 to 4 days a week from home. Work-related travel was also restricted, which would cause some delays in procurement projects and planned international cooperation. Arrangements were also made to ensure that the senior leadership were unlikely to be infected simultaneously.

The measures taken largely achieved the objectives set throughout much of 2020. However, the late 2020 emergence of new virus variants caused outbreaks of COVID-19 at some larger bases, as symptomless conscripts returned from leave and breakdowns occurred in FDF corona protocols, with cadre officers not sufficiently isolating suspected or confirmed cases. Reservist training was also again curtailed, along with continuing a near blanket stop to international exercises. The large (20,000 plus) multinational Arctic Lock exercise planned for the summer of 2021 was converted into a series of smaller national exercises (still involving 10,000 soldiers), with a small 350-person contribution from Sweden. International events such as the bi-annual Air Force-focused Arctic Challenge Exercise (ACE21) were also limited in scope. Limits on travel and the size of meetings caused small delays to the €10 billion Hx-project to replace Finland's fleet of fighter jets. However, the decision on which of five offers Finland will choose is still expected in 2021. An outbreak in the shipyard responsible for building the hull for Finland's Squadron 2020 Pohjanmaa-class ships has also delayed that project, but only marginally.

In March 2021, the city of Vantaa, part of the



“COVID-19 drive-through testing in Vantaa, Finland” (Photo by Coen, Vantaa, Finland, April 7, 2021)

greater capital region, requested assistance from the FDF to trace individuals potentially exposed to COVID-19. Nearly a dozen individuals with previous medical training who had undergone “tracing training” organized by universities were provided for a two-week period, and while Minister of Defence Antti Kaikkonen made clear that the FDF would seek to provide similar support to other regional authorities, additional requests did not materialize.

When the government considered temporary restrictions on movement in early March 2021, Minister of Interior Maria Ohisalo mooted the potential use of soldiers—cadre and conscripts—to support the police in enforcing the restrictions. Minister of Justice Anna-Maja Henriksson made her position clear, stating that Finland is not a police

state. The Finnish Defence Forces did not publicly comment on the matter, but there are indications that the leadership of the FDF did not look favorably at the proposal. As the temporary restrictions on movements were tabled, the issue regarding the use of soldiers to enforce it also disappeared from public debate.

Overall, the Finnish military has played a small direct role in the national effort to address COVID-19, but its broader societal role and frequent reminders of national security being a multi-generational effort are likely to have contributed to the overall resilience and sense of togetherness of the country, while maintaining the existing Finnish view of the armed forces.

## Cross-Cultural Comparisons

In order to facilitate learning and identify potentially useful lessons from others' experiences, four questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on views of the armed forces, civil-military relations, security partnerships and cooperation, and global power dynamics are relevant. Each question is addressed in isolation below, despite in practice being linked to each other.

### *COVID-19 and Public Views of the Armed Forces*

The public's view of the Finnish armed forces has not changed as a result of the country's COVID-19 experience. There are several reasons for this, but the most significant ones are that the military is a normal integrated part of society and that the military was not asked to take on tasks that did not fit the existing notions of its role as part of Finnish society.

The population at large saw the use of conscripts and cadre personnel to support the police (described above) as legitimate and useful. Had the Finnish Defence Forces been asked to take on tasks which were outside of its regular modes of assistance to authorities, but still legal and legitimate within the pandemic context, it would also have been unlikely to impact Finns' views on their armed forces. The reason for this is the high level of trust the Finnish Defence Forces enjoys. In the most recent Eurobarometer survey, 96 percent of Finns said they trust the military, compared to the 74 percent average across EU members.<sup>7</sup>

The fundamental explanation for this is that Finns see national defense as essential, and a clear majority see a national service-based system as a legitimate way to build and maintain the large, mobilized war-time size that the dimensioning threat requires. Almost every Finn has some "touchpoint" to national military service, either because of personal experience, or as a spouse, sibling,

grandparents, or friends. The armed forces are an integrated part of society, and therefore, barring a catastrophic failure to fulfill their main tasks, it is difficult to imagine a large change in how citizens view the military as a result of something like COVID-19.

However, an increasing number of citizens below the age of 35 years see a need to change the current system, with a slight majority of under 50-year-olds being open to making national service a requirement for both men and women (as opposed to just men), and developing it so that individual expertise might be better utilized in military and civilian "service paths." In general, the demands for change are borne out of a view that the current system is not equitable, and to better align national service efforts with the broad spectrum of potential threats identified in security strategies. Here, COVID-19 may have been a slight accelerant to an existing trend, with all age categories polled being more open at the end of 2020 (compared to 2019) to developing the national service system so that it could also be more easily utilized in cases such as pandemics or natural or man-made catastrophes.

Ultimately, the COVID-19 pandemic has not impacted Finns' views of the armed forces, because the military was used in a normal, legal, legitimate, and limited way to assist other authorities.

### *Impact of the Pandemic on Civil-Military Relations*

As noted, Finnish society as a whole did not see anything unusual in the way the military was used in support of other authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Finnish authorities, military, and politicians have also been careful to operate within the confines of the law throughout the pandemic, not seeking to push or pull new tasks onto the military. The core tasks of the military and the laws that govern the execution of those core tasks are quite clear, making it difficult to use the military in ways

for which it is not intended. The state of civil-military relations within Finland may reflect the fact that the Finnish military and defense landscape is a part of the regular societal tapestry, unlike in some countries with all-volunteer forces.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, there are few reasons for COVID-19 to impact civil-military relations. This applies equally—perhaps even more so—to the relationship between the cadre military and politicians or senior civil servants, the majority of whom have participated in the month-long national defense/security course to gain a deeper understanding of how Finnish society is to be defended and secured during times of crisis.

This “natural familiarity” combined with the limited role the military has played in the COVID-19 crisis means that there were few possible points of friction between the military and civilian leadership. Perhaps the one surprise, from the perspective of the senior defense leadership (both military and civilian), was how easily the Emergency Powers Act was activated. A range of annual decision-making exercises from the above-mentioned National Defence Courses to the VALHA-series involving the sitting government had generally suggested that the threshold for activating emergency powers was quite high, and even higher for the more comprehensive war-time powers.

Emphasizing the non-military and quickly developing nature of a pandemic, although the defense establishment had the most exercise-based experience and insight into the utilization of the Emergency Powers Act, its experience was largely sidelined when emergency powers were activated. The three primary reasons for this were that the military overall had a small role in addressing pandemics, that many of the exercises are classified, and that time pressures did not permit an in-depth analysis of experiences from the exercises.<sup>9</sup> As the military or civilian defense leadership did not have a central role to play in the management of the

pandemic, it also did not push its experiences onto others, further reducing the potential for civil-military friction. Because no public positions had to be taken, the mooted use of soldiers to enforce restrictions on the freedom of movement is unlikely to have any impact on civil-military relations. Rather, the clear reactions from the Minister of Justice and many in the media made clear that politicians could not haphazardly propose new tasks for the military.

What the civilian political leadership and the military leadership mainly focused on during 2020 and 2021 were three priorities. The first focus was on ensuring the FDF could continue its steady-state operations to guard Finnish territory and maintain the high-readiness units composed of cadre and conscripts. The second focus was on maintaining training functions, despite COVID-19-related restrictions. The third focus was on ensuring that two strategic (obviously non-nuclear) procurement projects—for new fighters and a new class of navy ships—proceeded as scheduled.

The need to complete the strategic procurement projects was a clear priority of the Finnish political establishment, despite the high economic costs that the pandemic was expected to cause. Finnish Prime Minister Marin stated as early as March 2020 that Finland’s defense had to be funded according to pre-pandemic plans. The Finance Minister and former Prime Minister, Matti Vanhanen, later clarified the logic, stating that the evaluation of Finland’s security environment on which military plans (including procurement) were based had not changed due to COVID-19, and therefore neither could the plans—including the timing of the €10 billion fighter procurement.<sup>10</sup> As such, when spending on the strategic procurement projects is included, the 2021 defense budget sees a 54 percent increase over 2020, for a total of €4.87 billion. Considering the above, it is not surprising that the Finnish Defence Forces, looking at what it has been given and the economy as a whole, made no effort

to increase its steady state budget by referring to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finnish national service is also in the process of being updated to better fit modern requirements, a process involving parliamentarians, civil servants, and numerous civil society organizations. As described above, there is increasing support for such a renewal, and experiences from addressing the pandemic have been fed into the process, but the totality of civil-military relations are unlikely to be affected by it.

Ultimately, because of the limited role of the military in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, and the clearly delineated roles various authorities have within Finland's security landscape, there was

very little potential for the COVID-19 pandemic and Finland's response to impact civil-military relations in Finland.

### *The Pandemic and Finland's Security Alignment and Partnerships*

The global pandemic has impacted Finnish views on security cooperation and partnerships, but not significantly changed how cooperation is valued or with whom it is done. This holds for both cooperation and partnerships domestically and internationally. Generally speaking, experience during the pandemic has highlighted the importance and value of national preparations and further emphasized that international cooperation is of



"Finland, Sweden and US sign trilateral agreement, with eye on increased exercises." (Photo by U.S. Defense Department)

value from both solidarity and pragmatic points of view.<sup>11</sup> Looking at opinion polls regarding international security cooperation or partnerships in 2019 and 2020 (cited below), there are only marginal changes, which are more likely to be a result of factors other than COVID-19. The fundamental reason why Finland's view on partnerships and cooperation has not been changed by COVID-19 is that, by its nature as a small country, Finland relies on international networks and cooperation to ensure its concerns and goals are at least addressed to some degree within the global political environment. As most small countries, Finland also recognizes that an ability to compromise as a part of cooperation is a sign of good statesmanship, rather than of weakness.

Internationally, the EU is Finland's key security alignment. Economic and security benefits were key arguments for Finnish membership in 1995. The EU's role in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic is viewed in a multitude of different ways within Finland, depending on the time, issue at hand, and political leaning. Overall, 87 percent of Finns have a positive view of military cooperation at the EU level, and 66 percent think the EU has a positive impact on Finnish security, with the latter having decreased by 3 percentage points over 2019, while the former increased by 4 percentage points over the same period. Overall, the EU's actions around the pandemic have been seen in Finland as additive rather than essential or critical. While several factors resulted in criticism of the EU's vaccination procurement and distribution in early 2021 (partially due to comparisons of initial rates of vaccinations in the United States and in Israel), it is fair to say that being part of the EU was beneficial for Finland. While approved, the EU's COVID-19 recovery package of some €750 billion has caused political debate in Finland. Some politicians were concerned that while the package is conceived of as a one-time common debt instrument, it lays the groundwork for more expansive EU-wide common debt projects, while

others argue that Finland will pay in more than its expected €2 billion receipt, which largely ignores the secondary benefits Finland's export-oriented economy can see if the Union's economy is strengthened. Ultimately, when the matter was voted on in the Finnish parliament, the importance of strengthening the Union's internal cohesion and solidarity was seen by a majority as more important for Finnish security in the long run.

In a piquant sidenote, the reality of being a smaller country and the limited nature of solidarity on the global stage was experienced by Finland in the spring of 2020 in the specific case of procuring PPE. Several shipments bound for Finland were diverted *en route* to larger EU member countries or others that simply paid more for shipments to be rerouted. In the eyes of the majority of Finns, however, the fundamental benefit of EU membership remains, as it enables Finland to deal on the global stage with both large private sector actors and other states on a more even footing than if Finland were forced to act on its own.

NATO is seen in Finland as a military alliance with a political role; its political role is slightly misunderstood and often not emphasized in Finnish debate. Thus, NATO is not seen as the most important or significant international actor or partnership in non-military security or safety issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The public actions of NATO members through various frameworks—conducting individual hospital-emergency flights, delivery of PPE, etc.—were generally seen as efforts to showcase solidarity, rather than as efforts that genuinely impacted how the pandemic evolved at societal or European levels. Opinions on NATO remain largely unchanged; 59 percent of Finns see cooperation with NATO as something positive, but only 21 percent want Finland to seek NATO membership. Neither number has changed from the previous few years. Thus, the Finnish defense establishment will continue to improve interoperability and cooperate with

NATO on a range of issues, including logistics and other issues that are relevant to addressing potential future pandemics.

In terms of Finland's two most important cooperative national relationships in the security sphere, with Sweden and with the United States, the pandemic response in both countries has not increased support for cooperation. On the other hand, the relatively catastrophic national responses to the pandemic in Sweden and the United States seem not to have impacted the general population's views on cooperation with either country, and political support for continuing to deepen cooperation with both through bilateral and trilateral approaches is strong across the political spectrum.

Regarding Sweden, military and broader security cooperation has increased significantly since 2014. While no formal alliance is expected, the air forces and navies of the two countries have shown that they can operate together and are conducting operational planning for scenarios where each country assists in the defense of the other. COVID-19 has not impacted cooperation between these two branches as much as between the armies, but as soon as the pandemic is under control, cooperation is expected to exceed previous levels. Support for military cooperation with Sweden has not been significantly impacted by COVID-19. There is a 4-percentage point drop in overall positive views on cooperation, from highs reached in 2019 (95 percent), with 91 percent in support in 2020. This could be due to a negative perception in Finland over Sweden's pandemic response, or because cooperation has featured less in the news, or because 95 percent support is simply hard to sustain.

The numbers supporting cooperation among parliamentarians are nearly identical, based on a 2019 study. Perhaps more significantly, a 2020 poll of Finnish parliamentarians suggests an appetite and readiness for increased cooperation: a majority of parliamentarians (62 percent) were ready to send

Finnish soldiers to aid in the defense of Sweden, even if Finland had not been attacked (drawing Finland into the conflict). A small majority (51 percent) also felt Finland and Sweden should enter into a defense alliance (27 percent were not sure and 22 percent were against the idea).<sup>12</sup> This and more conceptual analyses suggest that defense cooperation between Sweden and Finland will only deepen, with COVID-19 playing no role in the long-term dynamics of cooperation.<sup>13</sup>

Security and military cooperation between Finland and the United States has deepened significantly and continuously since Finland procured 64 F-18 C/D Hornets in the early 1990s (at the time, the largest ever Foreign Military Sales for the United States). Since 2014 this has included U.S. units training together with Finns on Finnish territory, with a 2016 memorandum of understanding setting out the framework for further deepening the relationship. Cooperation at the tactical level in exercises is likely to pick up again as pandemic restrictions lift, with the visit of U.S. Marine Corps fighter and refueler units totaling some 250 soldiers in June 2021 being an example. At the operational and strategic levels, cooperation is useful for both countries, with Finland controlling what is done in Finland and how things are publicized, and U.S. interest being driven by broader regional and global dynamics. While cooperation is likely to continue in any case, the forms of cooperation between the United States and Finland will be impacted by the choice Finland makes in its fighter procurement program at the end of 2021. However, both sides are expected to continue cooperation, whatever Finland's fighter choice, with the already achieved levels of trust being an important ingredient. An indication of the level of trust between the two countries can be seen in the weapons systems released to Finland during the past decade: Finland was the second country, after Australia, to procure the then top-flight U.S. air-to-ground weapon JASSM and was recently, as a

part of a larger package, given an offer for 14 F-18 G Growlers, the latter not having been released even to some countries that are procuring the F-35. Within this context, how the United States has addressed its domestic COVID-19 pandemic, or its more recent global efforts regarding vaccinations, are unlikely to have a meaningful impact on Finland's views on future security or military cooperation with the United States.

Opinion polls regarding military cooperation between Finland and the United States have shown a decrease in support between 2016 and 2019, from 64 to 52 percent with a positive view of cooperation. This decrease is likely to be partially attributable to broader views of then U.S. President Donald Trump. The decrease stabilized between 2019 and 2020, but with the proportion of those having a very positive view increasing (from 11 to 18 percent). In sum, other than limiting planned exercises and meetings to deepen cooperation, COVID-19 has not impacted security cooperation between Finland and the United States and is unlikely to do so.

In addition to the marginal changes in views on international cooperation described, the COVID-19 pandemic did have some impact on views of domestic cooperation. Finland's comprehensive societal security approach already relies heavily on cooperation between authorities, the private sector, and civil society organizations/NGOs. As such, the idea that various entities must cooperate when addressing national crises was not new, but rather is the foundation for all of Finland's preparedness work. However, the central insight from Finland's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic is that the comprehensive societal security model is a strong foundation for planning and preparation, while being deficient in terms of daily operational management of a dynamic and unforeseen crisis or development. The reasons for this lie in Finland's legislative and political structure. A shared, acknowledged situational picture is lacking, because

there is not one authority to compile one, in contrast to military contingencies, where the FDF is responsible for it and has the resources and wherewithal to do it. Because of the independence of individual authorities—regional, local, and national, as well as siloed ministries—the ability of the democratically elected political leadership to translate decision to actions was often limited. Too frequently authorities felt forced to apply legal frameworks and norms in situations that logically would have called for nearly opposite actions or behavior. At least some of these serious deficiencies are being addressed in legislation and planning that has started in preparation for future pandemics and other societal crises. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has awakened Finnish decisionmakers to serious issues regarding domestic cooperation that must be fixed, but has not changed views on the importance of cooperation itself.

Overall, Finland's most significant COVID-19 related responses were national, and thus most changed views on cooperation are related to domestic cooperation. International partnerships had a marginal role in Finland's pandemic response, but they are viewed as critical for Finland's broader security and economic well-being.

### *COVID-19 and Global Power Dynamics*

The global COVID-19 pandemic has further strengthened two Finnish preexisting views regarding global power dynamics and relationships; first, that unilateral, national preparation is critical, because international cooperation can be ineffective; and second, that great power competition is (again) the key driver of global power dynamics. Both views are enshrined in the most recent government report on foreign and security policy from 2020,<sup>14</sup> but similar assessments can be seen in earlier years in speeches by politicians and analyses by researchers and civil servants. If COVID-19 has had an impact, it is to have accelerated certain trends, for example, encouraging more thought on the vulnerable nature

of global supply chains and the need to ensure production of critical material is distributed globally, and from Finland’s perspective within the European Union.

Rather than having a large impact on views regarding global power dynamics or the main actors, the global pandemic looks, based on data, to have confirmed Finns’ views regarding great powers and global actors. When assessing the impact on Finnish security of various actors, Finns invariably give international organizations higher marks than individual countries. The table below shows how Finns see a range of countries and organizations impacting their security, with scores from 2020 and 2019 (in parentheses).

impacted Finns’ assessments of these global actors.

Many in Finland hoped initially that as the COVID-19 pandemic became truly global, it would cause global dynamics to tilt toward increased cooperation, which it did to a small degree. COVAX—led by the World Health Organization), the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovation (CEPI), and Gavi—has increasingly been able to ensure that vaccines are delivered to nations across the globe. However, the pace of vaccinations—despite increased availability of doses—may not be sufficient. As part of “Team Europe,” Finland has contributed to COVAX, Gavi, and CEPI, made additional core contributions to the organizations, and directed more than €80 million of its development

2020 (2019)	Positive Effect	Both Positive and Negative	Negative Effect	No Effect	Cannot Say
EU	66% (69%)	9% (12%)	7% (7%)	12% (14%)	6% (3%)
UN	57% (63%)	6% (6%)	2% (2%)	22% (20%)	13% (6%)
OSCE	39% (41%)	6% (6%)	2% (1%)	17% (24%)	37% (28%)
NATO	25% (25%)	21% (21%)	24% (28%)	11% (16%)	19% (9%)
USA	15% (17%)	28% (28%)	24% (29%)	16% (19%)	17% (7%)
Russia	7% (12%)	24% (29%)	47% (39%)	9% (13%)	13% (6%)
China	3% (6%)	19% (18%)	32% (25%)	24% (39%)	22% (12%)

Among Russia, China, and the United States, it is only regarding the last that negative views among Finns decreased between 2019 and 2020. Trends regarding more negative assessments of China’s and Russia’s impacts on Finnish security started earlier; in 2017-18 and 2015-16 respectively. Thus, it seems that while Russian, U.S., and Chinese actions related to the global pandemic may have had an impact on Finnish views of those countries, the trends began earlier, and several other issues are likely to have

cooperation funds to the fight against COVID-19. However, that spirit of cooperation has not spread to other spheres. Existing conflict and cooperative dynamics in the Middle East or Indo-Pacific, for example, have remained, and while temporary cooperation emerges according to national interest, the dynamics themselves seem not to have changed due to the global pandemic. There are also no signs in Finnish foreign and security policy thinking that suggest such a change in dynamics is expected.

## Conclusions and Lessons for Finland

The forgoing discussion suggests that COVID-19 has had a negligible impact on Finnish views regarding security, the role of militaries (including civil-military relations), or international military cooperation. This does not mean that the global pandemic has not changed Finnish perspectives. Rather, perhaps the pandemic has revealed to more Finns that nationally things have gone well, and that Finland is a good place to live; thus, Finland is a place worth defending and securing. Measures such as the Fragile State Index, where Finland annually ranks as the least fragile, or the World Happiness Report, where Finland again ranked first in 2021 (with little difference between 2017-2019 and 2020), may provide data to support the sense that there are few large course corrections that are seen as necessary. In practice, Finland like many other western countries must grapple with larger global issues, such as climate change or ongoing demographic shifts.

Looking at the four overlapping spheres that are seen to contribute to improving the security of Finland (global rules-based order, international cooperation, functional relationship with Russia, credible national defense capability) and Finnish views on global power dynamics, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic must be seen as limited. Finnish defense capability has not been significantly impacted, and unless there is a multi-year gap in larger and international exercises, it is unlikely to have an impact going forward. Finland's diplomatic relationship with Russia has not changed due to the pandemic. The millions of Russian tourists that visit Finland each year strengthen important societal, person-to-person contacts and the pandemic has obviously impacted that, but unless the pandemic causes a multi-year gap in tourism, it is unlikely to have a permanent impact. The character of international cooperation and solidarity suffered due to the initial rush for PPE, which resulted in a Melianesque

“the small take what the large leave over” affair.

Yet, cooperation in developing vaccines and their distribution show that international cooperation is possible, and critical in addressing pandemics like the one wrought by COVID-19. The global, rules-based order continues to be increasingly great-power focused, with traditional international organizations having a smaller role, a trend that pre-dates COVID-19.

Thus, the direct impact of the global pandemic on the central structures that improve Finnish security have not been greatly impacted by COVID-19. This does not mean COVID-19 has passed without lessons, especially regarding the domestic portion of Finnish preparedness within the comprehensive societal security construct. In practice, there are multiple lessons that Finns have drawn from their experience of the global pandemic. Four central ones emerge that may impact how Finns view the issues addressed in this article, and the relationship that national levers of power have when addressing global pandemics or domestic crises.

First is the importance of authorities across the spectrum having the capacity to analyze, prepare, plan, and lead responses to crises. In theory this exists, but there is a wide gap in capacity between traditional security organizations such as the military that do this on a daily basis and those that do not. Since having large planning staffs in every authority is impractical, there is a clear need to be able to quickly shift experienced analysts and planners to those authorities that need them in a crisis.

The pandemic has also highlighted that preparation alone is not enough, for three reasons: (1) it is impossible to predict in advance all possible events; (2) preparation was insufficient (the stockpiles of PPE being an example); and (3) it was incomplete in its focus. Thus, there is increased recognition that an ability to change and develop on the fly—to be flexible—is critical. This flexibility is severely limited by Finland's legal structure and system.

Second, the clear lack of an organization tasked with strategic-operational management and leadership to ensure political decisions are implemented is critical. Only the military has a standing capability and organization to do this, but in the case of the pandemic, too much was asked of Finnish health and social welfare/well-being authorities, already operating at near maximum capacity during normal times. The government offices (Valtioneuvoston kanslia) made efforts to make up for this, eventually forming a consultative and lightly coordinating body, but it did not have the mandate to actually impose and coordinate responses.

Third, siloed situational awareness is a reality that must be addressed. Judging from Sir David Omand this is not an observation unique to Finland. There is a need in many countries to include in assessments clear evaluations of the risks and potential likelihoods of threats or hazards, as well as to significantly strengthen the ability to combine stove-piped analysis and warning with robust political analysis.<sup>15</sup> Developing and determining a shared situational awareness (what has/is happening) is critical, and an even bigger challenge in the future, when the cyber domain must be integrated into the general situational awareness picture that can be shared at different levels of specificity and classification.

Fourth, Finland's overly specific and inflexible legislation combined with its political culture make it difficult to be flexible during rapidly changing crises. Some smaller changes in laws that were identified in the spring of 2020 have yet to come to fruition a year later. In a situation where the adversary changes its approach not based on evolution but intelligent analysis that seeks to take advantage of weak points, the kind of inflexibility exhibited by the Finnish legal-political system would be potentially catastrophic. The overall nature of the Finnish legal and political systems is unlikely to be changed without significant external impulses, but perhaps

future revisions to key laws can be written in a such a way as to enable a more flexible interpretation based on dynamically changing events. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An example of the polls is the one conducted by the Finnish Business and Policy Forum (EVA), where the public was asked whether they continued to support the governments' actions despite the exceptional measures taken to address Covid-19. In spring 2020, 89 percent agreed, in the fall of 2020, 71 percent agreed, and in the spring of 2021, 72 percent agreed. Poll results can be found at: <https://www.eva.fi/blog/2021/05/03/suomalaiset-antavat-yha-siunauksensa-koronatoinille-mutta-kritiikki-kasvaa/>.

<sup>2</sup> The Finnish military does contribute to international operations led by NATO, EU or UN but less than 5% of resources go toward international crisis management operations.

<sup>3</sup> Charly Salenius-Pasternak (2020), "Finland's response to the COVID-19 epidemic," FIIA Comment, [https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/comment5\\_finlands-response-to-the-covid-19-epidemic.pdf](https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/comment5_finlands-response-to-the-covid-19-epidemic.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The seven critical functions of society are: (1) Leadership; (2) International and EU activities; (3) Defence capability (only one the military is responsible for managing); (4) Internal security; (5) Economy, infrastructure and security of supply; (6) Functional capacity of the population and services (for example education and healthcare); and (7) Psychological resilience. For further information, see <https://turvallisuuskomitea.fi/en/security-strategy-for-society/vital-functions/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mörttinen, "Valtioneuvoston ydin kriisitilanteessa -Covid-19-pandemian paineet suomalaiselle päätöksenteolle," 11–15.

<sup>6</sup> Aaltola et al., "An Abrupt Awakening to the Realities of a Pandemic: Learning Lessons from the Onset of COVID-19 in the EU and Finland," 9–12; Mörttinen, "Valtioneuvoston ydin kriisitilanteessa -Covid-19-pandemian paineet suomalaiselle päätöksenteolle," 24–30. Finnish Institute of International Affairs, [https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/wp122\\_covid-19\\_realities\\_of\\_a\\_pandemic.pdf](https://www.fiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/wp122_covid-19_realities_of_a_pandemic.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> "Kansalaismielipide Euroopan Unionissa Talvi 2020-2021," 10.

<sup>8</sup> Nina Wilén (2021), "The Military in the Time of COVID-19," *PRISM* V.9,N.2, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2541745/the-military-in-the-time-of-covid-19-versatile-vulnerable-and-vindicating/>.

<sup>9</sup>Mörttin, “Valtioneuvoston ydin kriisitilanteessa -Covid-19-pandemian paineet suomalaiselle päätöksenteolle,” 27.

<sup>10</sup>French Institute of International Relations (2021), “Collective Collapse or Resilience? European Defense Priorities in the Pandemic Era,” <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/focus-strategique/collective-collapse-or-resilience-european-defense>.

<sup>11</sup>Aaltola et al. (2021), “Solidarity during Covid-19 at national, regional and global levels: An enabler for improved global pandemic security and governance,” Finnish Institute of International Affairs briefing paper, <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/solidarity-during-covid-19-at-national-regional-and-global-levels>.

<sup>12</sup>Charly Salenius-Pasternak, “Eduskunnassa yhtenäinen rintama”; Salenius-Pasternak, “Kansanedustajien näkemyksiä turvallisuuspolitiikasta vuonna 2020.”

<sup>13</sup>Salenius-Pasternak, Charly & Vanhanen, Henri. (2020). Finnish-Swedish Defence Cooperation: What History Suggests about Future Scenarios. 10.13140/RG.2.2.16639.74406.

<sup>14</sup>Valtioneuvosto, “Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy.”

<sup>15</sup>David Omand (2021), “Natural Hazards and National Security: The COVID-19 Lessons,” *PRISM* V.9,N.2, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2541599/natural-hazards-and-national-security-the-covid-19-lessons/>.