New Finnish government focuses on global security issues

Subtle changes are likely in the security and defence policy of the new Finnish government that took power in June. Charly Salonius-Pasternak examines the government and EU presidency programmes for clues about likely evolutions

Key Points
- In defence and security policy, the government of Prime Minister Antti Rinne has laid out programmes with similarities to its predecessor, albeit with a greater emphasis on global issues.
- Readiness is now the key driver for the Finnish Defence Forces, and reinforced mechanised rapid reaction companies will be expanded to large battalions.
- Finland is almost certain to maintain a position of being a close partner but not a member of NATO, with only a strong external stimulus – most likely Russian actions – being capable of changing this position.

Following the parliamentary election on 14 April 2019, a coalition of centre-left parties – the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Greens, the Left Alliance, and the Swedish People’s Party – on 2 June agreed to the formation of a new government under Social Democrat leader Antti Rinne. Rinne’s government is the first centre-left government since 2003–07, but has produced a strategic policy programme – Inclusive and competent Finland, published on 6 June 2019 – that is similar to that of the preceding centre-right government.

The programme retains fundamental precepts of Finnish security policy: continuing to stress the importance of international norms, co-operation, and diplomacy; deepening EU security co-operation and multilateral defence co-operation; keeping open the possibility of applying for NATO membership; and funding a robust national defence system. Such an approach speaks to a broad consensus on the fundamental tenets of Finnish security policies.

Finland’s international profile is also high: the country hosted a series of international military exercises in early 2019, and began its six-month EU Council presidency on 1 July. The government is casting itself as more global and proactive than its predecessor, positioning the country as seeking to address root causes of global challenges beyond the country’s borders, yet within a multilateral framework.

Unlike in previous years, the military exercises took place with routine publicity and little public comment. The strategic signal that the exercises send is that the Finnish defence...
forces can from ‘day one’ operate with allied members’ militaries in a high-end fight against a modern adversary.

Meanwhile, Finland’s third EU Council presidency began more calmly than its previous leaderships in 1999 and 2006, partly because the demands of the presidency are fewer, but also because Finland is more comfortable advancing various EU processes at the same time as recognising that it will be called on to guide EU members behind different normative policy positions. Some diplomatic sources have expressed satisfaction to Jane’s that Finland is in charge as the EU steers through a likely tumultuous six months because of issues such as Brexit and a new EU Commission taking office.

A Swedish Gripen jet (left) and a Finnish F/A-18 Hornet take part in joint exercises between the two air forces over the Arctic Circle towns of Jokkmokk in Sweden and Rovaniemi in Finland on 25 March 2019. Finnish military co-operation with Sweden is set to increase further. (Jonathan Nackstrand/AFP/Getty Images)

Continuity and values

Of the seven strategic themes in the 6 June programme, section 3.2 on ‘Globally influential Finland’ includes several foreign and security policy sub-themes. After a description of the current geopolitical situation with only a brief reference to Russia, the key elements of the new government’s foreign and security policy – the foundational values on which Finland’s foreign and security policies are to be formed – are described as the “promotion of human
rights, the rule of law, democracy, peace, freedom, tolerance, and equality in all international activities”, to be pursued through “good bilateral relations, an active role within the European Union, and effective multilateral cooperation based on respect for and strengthening of international law.

Finnish foreign policy is often described as pragmatic. Minister of Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto told Jane’s on 24 June that negotiations over the programme were notable for universal cross-party agreement that values should be at its centre. According to Haavisto, the focus on values explained why the programme began with climate change, the implications of which inform all aspects of the programme. Two other focus areas are human rights and supporting the existing global multilateral frameworks, including the UN and EU.

Finnish governments have traditionally promoted human rights and multilateral organisations such as the UN, and Haavisto underlined two priorities to Jane’s. First, the government wanted a stronger and expanded EU, and welcomed membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia; second, rule of law issues in Poland and Hungary needed to be addressed, since “we do live in a value-based community”.

The programme’s ‘phenomenon-based’ approach – alluded to by Haavisto and other ministers, and meaning that policy conclusions are drawn from a wide view with expert analysis – will be visible in foreign policy, and Haavisto noted the example of the role of arms exports in aiding human rights violations. According to Haavisto, arms exports would therefore come under greater scrutiny, a process already begun for exports to countries actively fighting in Yemen. In November 2018, for example, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs withdrew export permits for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, although existing agreements were unaffected.

The programme also mentions Finnish President Sauli Niinistö’s concept of an ‘active policy of stability’ in the Baltic Sea region. This concept relies on four pillars: a credible national defence system; working relations with neighbouring countries (implicitly signalling Russia); an evolving network of bilateral and multilateral security relationships; and support for an international rules-based order and the UN. These pillars are actively adjusted to maintain a relatively stable Baltic Sea security environment.

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