

PETRI SARVAMAA

The future of defence in Europe

Expert article • 2175

Security concerns in Europe have changed greatly since 2010. For a long time focus was on Iraq, Afghanistan, and terrorism. Baltic Sea region was not given much thought. Now situation is different.

Russia's aggressive defence policy has become reality in Ukraine, Crimea, and Syria. The war in Syria has also added to the flow of migrants and refugees into Europe. Terrorism is spreading in Africa and ISIS has not been beaten in the Middle East. Terrorist attacks are continuing in Europe. Turkey, a NATO member and EU's neighbour, is still dealing with the consequences of the attempted military coup. Cyber-attacks coming from Russia have become a norm to deal with.

These threats are recognized throughout Europe. There is clearly need for more security. But every country has reacted in their own way depending on history, geography, politics and economics. The Nordic countries are culturally, politically, and societally very similar. Russia is seen as a threat and there is high interest in cyber security. But there are big differences in institutional attachments and defence policies.

Finland has always given priority to national defence due to its history and long land border with Russia. As Russia is the biggest security concern in Finland, its recent actions have caused

Finland to increase defence spending by 6.8% in 2016 after several years of cuts. The Finnish approach continues to rely on territorial defence and large armed forces made of a compact conscript based military and a big reserve. Finland is not in NATO but works together with the alliance and could consider applying for a membership if international circumstances change. There are also strong bilateral defence relations with the US and Sweden.

Sweden is a different story. For Swedes a long time key focus was in participating in crisis management in developing countries. Sweden even got rid of conscription in 2010. Now it is shifting focus back to national defence and slightly increasing her defence budget. Main reason for this is Russia's increased military activity. Military presence will be reintroduced in Gotland, which is strategically very important, and conscription might be brought back in 2018. There is

also increasing support for NATO membership.

Denmark relies heavily on NATO. Territorial defence has not been a main concern and even having a national military has been questioned. Recently Russia's actions have turned the ship around also in Denmark and with Norway it now contributes to the increased NATO presence in Baltic countries.

Norway too has increased defence investments during the past few years and highlighted the importance of NATO. The Norwegian military is small, based on conscription and has close ties with the US and UK. In 2015 Norway extended conscription also to women and in 2016 it made plans to restructure its military.

As a response to Russia's involvement in Ukraine and elsewhere NATO decided to increase its presence in Baltic countries and sooth their security worries. Also the Baltics have made serious efforts to improve their own defence. In 2015 Lithuania reintroduced conscription and increased its defence spending by 36.2% in 2016. Latvia increased it by 45.2% and is also considering returning to

conscription. Estonia has been more consistent with spending more on defence during the past years. In 2016 defence spending was 2.2% of Estonia's GDP - 2% being NATO's target that only a few members have reached.

Poland's defence relies on territorial

defence and NATO. NATO has also placed important missile technology in Poland, which means in practice that the US could never leave Poland alone. On the other hand there is a risk that the current government's domestic politics might alienate Poland from its allies. Poland too is modernising its defence, although the starting point is not quite as low as in the Baltic countries. Economic growth has helped Poland to increase its military spending and in 2019 it was 1.9% of Poland's GDP.

Germany has traditionally had a pacifist attitude because of its own history. The size of Germany's military is at its lowest since 1955 when the forces were created. But unlike in the past, the German government now assesses that an armed conflict between countries is becoming more and more possible also in Europe. Consequently Germany has opened up its military to all EU citizens to make up for

There is clearly need for more security. But every country has reacted in their own way depending on history, geography, politics and economics.

the lack of personnel and increased the country's defence budget with an emphasis on research and development. In addition, Germany has recently adopted a more active defence policy and taken a stronger role in NATO.

Austria's main security concerns are linked to migration flows and terrorism. In 2013 there was a referendum on conscription and the Austrians decided to keep compulsory military service. Much like Finland, Austria highlights its territorial integrity. Providing military assistance to civil authorities and crisis management are the two other cornerstones of Austrian defence policy.

Terror attacks are seen as the biggest threat in France and its reaction differs a lot from the Nordics' and Baltics' responses. France is in fact increasing its involvement in Middle East and especially in Sahel, possibly even in Libya, highlighting France's close ties to Africa. To keep up with its overseas commitments France had to cut back its presence in Eastern Europe even after announcing it will increase the size of the reserve. The French defence budget increased by 1.2% in 2016 and after the terrorist attacks politicians have called for more increases to meet NATO's target. France is also still very keen on keeping its nuclear weapons and continuing defence cooperation with the UK.

The UK with its large nuclear capacity and a big budget is a European defence giant. It wants to keep playing an important role in NATO and modernise its own military. In 2016 the UK decided to double its personnel in UN peacekeeping missions. Recently there has been a nominal increase in defence spending but it is not comparable to the increases made in other countries. The UK is also preparing to buy new defence equipment but if Brexit causes negative economic consequences these plans might have to be reviewed.

There is a sense of insecurity in Europe. Security environment

is getting worse but the economy is getting slightly better. This has meant a small increase in defence spending. When one European country strengthens and takes responsibility of its own defence, it will have a positive impact on the security of the other countries too.

Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Germany, France, and UK are all members of EU and NATO, and Norway is in NATO. This helps to understand the higher emphasis on national territorial defence in Finland, Sweden and Austria. Geography and history on the other hand impact greatly on the perception of threats.

After the end of Cold War a great number of European countries have cut down their military capabilities, reduced their personnel numbers and defence budgets. Peace was thought to spread on its own weight. The economic crisis certainly did not change the negative trend in defence spending. But the troubles in Europe's Eastern and Southern neighbourhood just might. New threats, pressure from the US, and positive examples may lead to even more countries committing to spend 2% of their GDP to defence. ■



PETRI SARVAMAA

Member of the European Parliament