



## Is Finland taking a step closer to NATO membership?

By Nigel Chamberlain, NATO Watch

### Memorandum of Understanding

[Finland's Defence Minister Carl Haglund](#) said that the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that his government agreed with NATO on 22 April 2014 is not a step towards NATO membership. It is believed to be similar to the military interoperability deal to which Sweden has also subscribed and is based on [Finland's commitment to NATO's Partnership for Peace](#), and to support its Planning and Review Process (PARP). The MoU is a commitment to Finland's armed forces involvement in NATO training exercises and to maintain military assets such as ships and aircraft. It is also a statement of willingness to receive assistance from foreign forces in times of crisis.

[Defense News](#) reported that the Finnish Government is playing down speculation that the agreement marks the beginning of a process toward full NATO membership within 10 years. They do suggest, however, that the MoU "represents a landmark shift in Finland's traditional defence policy of non-alignment and self-reliance" and, as well as guaranteeing NATO military support should Finnish territory be attacked, "Finland would invest in a NATO-centred military organization able to interact with NATO militaries and conduct maintenance on NATO ships and aircraft, and provide facilities for fuel and equipment maintenance for land forces".

The MoU has not been made publicly available, nor has it been referred to, on either the Finnish Ministry of Defence or the NATO websites.

### Divided opinion

Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja said that the agreement is not yet a binding political commitment, although he accepted there is a danger that some may feel that it is. Finland's President and Security and Defence Ministers will meet to consider the contents and implications of the MoU, with a formal agreement expected within months. [Prime Minister Jyrki Katainen](#) has indicated that he supports NATO membership, although he stressed that it was a personal view and not government policy.

The MoU has divided opinion inside and outside government. [Defense News](#) reported that the Leader of the Left Alliance Party, Paavo Arhinmäki, said:

*We still do not know what precisely the pact under discussion will involve. It was not openly discussed at Cabinet level during my time in government, or in the parliamentary Foreign and Security Committee where I was a member. We were left in the dark, and I was very surprised to learn of this NATO pact.*

And Chairwoman of the True Finns Parliamentary Group, [Pirkko Anneli Ruohonen-Lerner](#) said that the crisis in Ukraine "has made a Finland-NATO pact more urgent," and while "our armed forces already use a large amount of NATO-compatible equipment, a NATO pact will provide Finland with a life insurance policy if it finds itself in a tight spot". In a radio interview she said: "I see NATO as a legitimate option – though it's not really a current issue".

Earlier in April, [former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari](#) repeated his call of four years ago for Finland to join NATO, alongside Sweden. He said he believed NATO membership would be benefit debt-burdened Finland and would increase the confidence of other states in his country. He suggested that membership might attract investment into Finland. The current President, [Sauli Niinistö](#), said that the crisis in Ukraine has influenced the public perception of NATO, steering the debate on the defence alliance in a new direction as the arguments heard over and over again over the past decades are hopefully updated.

National Coalition Party leadership candidate and [Social Services and Health Minister Paula Risikko](#) said recently that the question of joining NATO should be decided by a national referendum while supporting the idea of Finland's defence self-sufficiency and Nordic cooperation. Other leadership candidates are European and Foreign Trade Minister Alexander Stubb and Economic Affairs Minister Jan Vapaavuori. Both have expressed strong support for Finland's NATO membership.

A [recent survey](#) showed that 34 percent of respondents would support Finland joining NATO, with 45 percent opposing membership. 29 percent were in favour last summer, with 52 opposed. In February, [NATO Secretary General Rasmussen](#) declined to speculate on the impact of the low public support for NATO membership in Finland saying: "Both Sweden and Finland are advanced democracies, and I can't imagine membership applications without relatively broad political and national support".

## **Nordic cooperation**

Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and Finnish President Sauli Niinistö agreed during the annual Society and Defence conference in Sälen, Sweden on 12 January that they should build [a special defence relationship](#) as a means of reinforcing their non-aligned positions and to remain outside NATO.

A 12 January survey by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency showed support for NATO membership has increased from 30 to 36 percent. 40 percent of Swedes oppose NATO membership while 24 percent are undecided. [A](#)

[survey](#) showed that 54 percent of Finns would support a military alliance with Nordic neighbour Sweden. Closer military cooperation between the two Nordic countries was agreed in principle on 6 May when both Defence Ministers signed an [Action Plan](#).

An interim joint investigation report identifying practical ways to pool defence resources and share tasks will be drafted by October, with a final report due in January 2015. According to [Defense News](#), "the investigation will examine nine core areas for closer collaboration, including common equipment procurement and joint multi-branch exercises. The study also will examine creating joint air and naval units, as well as jointly purchasing corvettes or frigates". The objective is to be able to deploy troops with a common capability standard to participate in United Nations, EU or NATO-led crisis management operations, Haglund said.

As Chair of the Swedish People's Party (RKP), [Carl Haglund](#) said in his speech that he is of the opinion that the crisis in Ukraine has added momentum to the NATO debate in Finland: "It is a bit of a paradox that Russia's actions have pushed Finland and Sweden closer to NATO membership than ever before. I doubt that was the Russian intention". He added that he hoped discussion regarding the defence policy of the country will continue until the next parliamentary election, as Finland needs to engage in a serious debate on the country's defence and security solutions. Haglund indicated that he expected his own RKP party to decide its official position on these matters by next year's party conference at the latest.

On 23 January, [Haglund](#) met US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel at the Pentagon and gave a presentation on regional cooperation and Nordic defence cooperation at the [Atlantic Council](#) which stated that Finland is "one of NATO's most effective partners in the region".

## **Aircraft procurement**

Aerospace Defence Industries in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden signed an MoU in November 2012 (the text of the agreement can be viewed [here](#)). However, [Defense News](#) also reported that the NATO MoU is expected to bolster Finland's interest in acquiring F-35 aircraft

to replace the F/A-18 Hornets in 2025-30. The MoD has not yet decided how many replacement aircraft to buy for the Finnish Air Force, but a budget is expected to be set at a minimum of €5 billion. Many, like Speaker of the Finnish Parliament, Eero Heinäluoma, see the defence agreement as an opportunity to support Swedish industry by buying Saab's Gripen-E combat jets. However, Haglund said: "While I advocate cooperation with Sweden, I do not see why we should buy Gripen fighters when we could acquire American F-35 stealth fighters for approximately the same price. Performance must take precedence in this investment".

## **Accession agreement in all but name?**

The April 2014 NATO-Finland MoU builds on a 2005 MOU between the United States Air Force in Europe and the the Ministry of Defence of Finland (the full text of which can be viewed [here](#)). Posted on the Lexington Institute website recently is a piece by [Daniel Gouré](#) who states:

*The MoU marks a watershed in Finnish foreign and security policy which, up to this point, has studiously avoided any actions that would cast a shadow over its position of absolute neutrality. ... This is an accession agreement in almost everything but name. It is much more than partnership countries got prior to beginning the process of entering the Alliance. ... For NATO, access to Finnish ports, airfields and other facilities adds a strategic depth to its forward position in the Baltics that was heretofore missing.*