

The Big Read **Geopolitics**

War with Russia? Finland has a plan for that



For decades, the country has harnessed every level of society to prepare for the possibility of conflict with its neighbour

Richard Milne in Helsinki 15 HOURS AGO

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If the worst fears of Europe are realised and the [conflict in Ukraine](#) spreads across the continent to other neighbours of Russia, then Finland will be ready.

It has supplies. At least six months of all major fuels and grains sit in strategic stockpiles, while pharmaceutical companies are obliged to have 3-10 months' worth of all imported drugs on hand.

It has civilian defences. All buildings above a certain size have to have their own bomb shelters, and the rest of the population can use underground car parks, ice rinks, and swimming pools which stand ready to be converted into evacuation centres.

And it has fighters. Almost a third of the adult population of the Nordic country is a reservist, meaning Finland can draw on one of the biggest militaries relative to its size in Europe.

“We have prepared our society, and have been training for this situation ever since the second world war,” says Tytti Tuppurainen, Finland’s EU minister. After spending eight decades living first in the shadow of the Soviet Union and now Russia, the threat of [war in Europe](#) “has not hit us as a surprise”.

The improvised “total defence” strategy that has defined Ukraine’s dogged defence against Russia’s invasion, with newly-weds and shopkeepers reportedly taking up arms, has captivated people around the world.

But what Finland calls its strategy of “comprehensive security” offers an example of how countries can create rigorous, society-wide systems to protect themselves ahead of time — planning not just for a potential invasion, but also for natural disasters or cyber attacks or a pandemic.





A sports arena in Helsinki that can be adapted as an emergency shelter for civilians © Lehtikuva

This is not only about military readiness. It also extends to what Charly Salonius-Pasternak, a security expert at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, describes as the “boring, unsexy work” of ensuring that laws and rules work in times of crisis.

Finland has created informal networks between the elites of the political, business and non-governmental-organisation worlds to prepare for the worst. It looks continuously at what its main weaknesses are, and tries to correct them to create as much resilience as possible in the system before a crisis happens.

The [war in Ukraine](#) has underscored how exposed Finland, with its 1,340km border with Russia, is to attack. The prospect of joining the [Nato military alliance](#) is now being discussed by Finnish leaders, as countries across [Europe reassess](#) their levels of co-operation on defence and security. For the first time in its history, a majority of Finns now support applying for [Nato membership](#).

But the country of 5.5mn people also sees the urgency of maintaining and upgrading its national strategy.

“Given our geostrategic location, and our large land mass and sparse population, we need to have everything to defend the country . . . We train on many levels regularly to make sure everybody knows what to do — the political decision-making, what do the banks do, the church does, industry does, what is media’s role,” says Janne Kuusela, director-general for defence policy at the defence ministry. “The end result is you can turn this society into crisis mode if needs be.”

The Winter War legacy

Much of Finland's preparedness stems from its own war with Moscow, which has echoes on the invasion of Ukraine. In 1939-40, Finns fought in the brutal Winter War to hold off the Soviet Union, but lost a large chunk of their territory as a result, including their most cosmopolitan city, Vyborg, and one of their main areas of industry. Rebuilding after this conflict, Finns vowed: never again.

"We have had hard experiences in history many times. We haven't forgot it, it is in our DNA. That is why we have been very careful in maintaining our resilience," says president Sauli Niinisto. He points to opinion polls suggesting about three-quarters of Finns are willing to fight for their country, by far the highest figure in Europe.

Finland has a wartime troop strength of about 280,000 people while in total it has 900,000 trained as reservists. It carried on with conscription for all male school-leavers even after the end of the cold war, when many countries in Europe stopped, and Helsinki has maintained strong defence spending even as others cut in the 1990s and 2000s.



Almost a third of the adult population of the Nordic country is a reservist, meaning Finland can draw on one of the biggest militaries relative to its size in Europe © Lehtikuva

Detailed planning is in place for how to handle an invasion, including the deployment of fighter jets to remote roads around the country, the laying of mines in key shipping lanes, and the preparation of land defences such as blowing up bridges.

Jarmo Lindberg, Finland's former chief of defence, says that the Finnish capital Helsinki "is like Swiss cheese" with dozens of kilometres of tunnels. "There are areas like a James Bond film," he adds. All armed force headquarters are located in hillsides under "30-40 metres of granite," he says.

If a likely attack was detected by military intelligence, forces would be mobilised and, as far as possible, civilians would be evacuated from danger areas, a marked difference to what has happened in Ukraine.

Kuusela says that the very core of Finland's strategy is the will of its citizens to fight and defend a country, recently named by the UN for the fifth year in a row as the world's happiest nation.

"Being a Finn is a deal," he adds. "We are number one in the world in being happy. On the other hand, the other side is that you are prepared to defend this . . . We had a near-death experience in the second world war that only strengthened us."

Strategic stockpiles

Finns know this may well not be enough in itself, so they have also worked hard on preparing systematically for crises. "[We try] to make sure our society is strong and can deal with difficult times," says Niinisto. "Readiness and preparedness are deep down in Finnish minds."

Key to this is enlisting Finland's corporate sector to play a leadership role in preparations and in crisis management. Salenius-Pasternak considers Finland's ability to call on its biggest companies at any time to tackle a national crisis a huge advantage as it "harnesses the market economy for a prepper society".

Each critical industry — such as telecoms, food supply, or energy — meets several times a year where, in carefully supervised discussions, they talk about issues that could affect their sector.





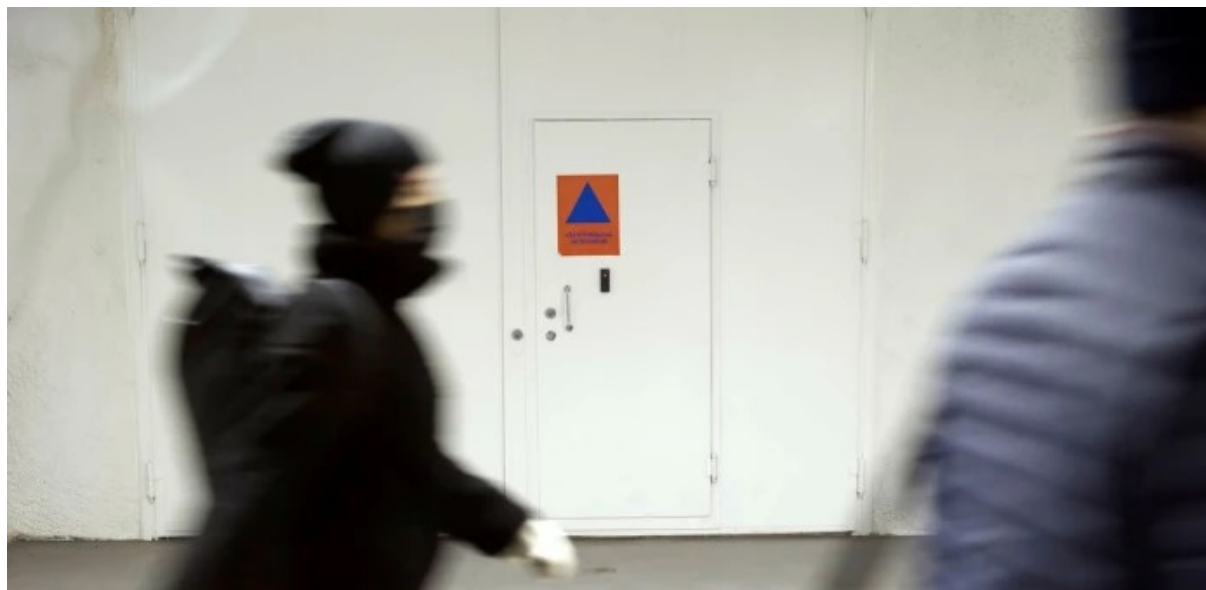
In 1939, Finns fought in the brutal Winter War to hold off the Soviet Union © Hulton Archive/Getty Images

“The fundamental idea is: if one company or sector is impacted, how do you still solve the problem? For instance, how do you feed the nation or keep it in toilet paper if there’s a blockade in the Baltic Sea?” says Salonius-Pasternak.

Companies in Finland “get it,” says Kuusela. “The company leadership have been serving in the military. We don’t have business, we don’t have welfare, we don’t have growth, if our defence fails. It’s well understood.”

The National Emergency Supply Agency (Nesa) helps co-ordinate this network of companies, but its responsibilities go well beyond that. It also has a balance sheet of €2.5bn, which consists of its strategic stockpiles of six months’ supply of grains such as wheat and oats, and different types of fuel such as petrol and diesel as well as certain undisclosed “strategic assets” including partial ownership of the national grid.

Janne Kankanen, chief executive of Nesa, says the agency collects a small levy from all fossil fuel and electricity purchases in Finland, giving it “quite a lot of leeway so we have an ability to respond to different types of occurrence at very short notice”.





A commuter passes a door to a civil defence shelter in Helsinki © Lehtikuva

It can purchase critical material quickly, but can also look at different sectors and ask, for instance, if Finnish farmers will produce enough grain this season. Since December, it has been monitoring “extra intensively” the situation in Ukraine, pivoting from its previous focus on the Covid-19 pandemic.

Through its network of companies in all sectors, it is able to “keep and develop a situational awareness”, Kankanen says, by ensuring information flows both ways about what is happening and potential problems.

“In times of crisis like this, it’s of course easier because we have the system in place and don’t have to start building something from scratch,” he adds. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will lead to a discussion to raise preparedness, Kankanen stresses, and potentially increase stockpiles.

The business elite and the military

To ensure senior members of Finland’s establishment understand what is at stake, they are invited to participate in what the country calls National Defence Courses.

Four times a year, a group of several dozen politicians, business leaders, and representatives from the church, media and non-governmental organisations meet for a month-long intensive programme involving lectures from senior military officers and government officials as well as a crisis simulation.

Tuppurainen took part in 2014, while business leaders such as Jorma Ollila, former head of Nokia, and Mika Ihamuotila, chair of fashion brand Marimekko, attended almost as soon as they became chief executives.

Salonius-Pasternak says it is “eye-opening” for business leaders to play politicians and vice versa in scenarios such as “the water level of the Baltic Sea rises, we have to shut down our nuclear power plants, or there’s a plague”. He adds: “Is there a solution to them? Of course there isn’t. The point is to get to know people, and to find out what problems a company or government could have in a crisis.”

In total, 10,000 people have been trained in such courses over the past six decades and most intakes still meet regularly to discuss matters. A further 60,000 have attended regional defence courses. Salonius-Pasternak adds that the courses are probably the easiest element of Finland's approach that other countries could easily emulate.



An emergency shelter in Kallio, Helsinki. All buildings above a certain size have to have their own bomb shelters © Lehtikuva

A more humdrum but no less essential part of preparedness is how Finnish authorities, after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, combed through all the country's security legislation to ensure it was fit for purpose and that "little green men" could not exploit any loopholes.

Officials tell of painstaking work to ensure laws are adapted to a crisis situation, for instance allowing companies in the same sector to talk to each other in a national emergency without being accused of operating like a cartel. "It can be as simple as making sure a clause in each law contains something like 'this provision would be suspended in a crisis'," says one Finnish civil servant.

Finland is not just focused on the threat of invasion, but on other forms of attack — be they local, such as the poisoning of a water source or incapacitation of a power station, or national, like cyber attacks.

There's an increasing focus on so-called hybrid threats, actions that are often ambiguous and do not meet the level of a full military attack. Teija Tiilikainen, director of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats based in Helsinki, says that Finland needs to be "more proactive" in identifying its vulnerabilities in advance. In 2015, for instance, it was caught unaware by Russia sending illegal migrants over the border.

"That Russia has started a war against a smaller neighbour can only strengthen the understanding of our vulnerability. Public awareness about risks and threats is at a high level," she says.

Now is the time for Finland to refocus its efforts, says Niinisto. "These decades when we have had full peace and welfare, life has been easier than it used to be. The worries and bad things have been further away. Because of that, we have now a wake-up call to improve."

Surviving a pandemic

Before war broke out in Europe, Finland's readiness was put to the test by Covid-19. While the consensus is that the country came through the pandemic in good shape, experts say it exposed room for improvement.

The main issue came in difficulties in the government implementing and communicating decisions it had taken efficiently. One difficulty, for instance, was in testing arriving passengers at airports. The government took a decision but it turned out 21 different actors needed to be involved to implement it.

"The number one issue is we need to streamline our crisis management system," says Petri Toivonen, secretary-general of Finland's security committee. But he adds: "We don't want to have a system that is effective against Covid-19 but not against a military attack."





A selection of survival devices that are stored in shelters around the country © Lehtikuva

A danger is always that authorities rectify things based on the previous crisis, but Toivonen says a strength of Finland’s approach is that it helps prepare for “black swans”, or unexpected events, by having as its main focus protecting the “vital functions” of society.

Salonius-Pasternak says another issue is that the strategy sometimes overlooks the general public, out of a misconception that individuals need not be bothered if the system is in place.

“People need to have a general idea of what to do. It’s an easy thing, and it helps with your first 72 or 96 hours of a crisis. This is where there is a lack, and some learning to be done,” he adds.

There is little doubt that Finns are unnerved by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, another of its non-Nato neighbours. Helsinki has always striven for good neighbourly relations with Russia due to its long, shared border but that hope has now been shattered.

During the Cold War, Finland’s location forced it to accept neutrality to keep the Soviet Union at bay, but after joining the EU in 1995 and drawing closer to Nato over the past decades, there is a growing sense in Helsinki that membership of the military alliance would cement its status as an independent, western country.

But there is also a belief that the Ukraine war demonstrates the wisdom of Finland’s approach all these years. “The simple idea is that it’s a country worth defending and therefore you have a larger responsibility, whether you’re a CEO or a school teacher,” says Salonius-Pasternak. What Ukraine has taught us, he continues, is that “the will to do something really matters. And if you combine that with, one, the network effects of a small country, and two, preparation, that’s really powerful.”

Underlying it all is a sense that even as Ukraine and the Nato debate change much in

Underlying it all is a sense that, even as Ukraine and the Nato debate change much in the country, the one constant is and will be that Finland will remain a neighbour of Russia.

“Some say we have fought 32 wars against Russia, others 42,” says Lindberg, the former chief of defence. “All I know is that Russia will always be there, and we know we will be ready.”

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