



Comprehensive Unrest: Finnish Future Operating Environment 2040

Antti Pihlajamaa

Concepts and Doctrine Division

The Finnish future operating environment contains a large scope of various drivers of change, including both external and internal issues. Finland should avoid short-sighted, reactive activity and keeping the defence system in constant overdrive. This may require foundational changes to the Finnish mindset.

Finland’s security environment has undergone a significant transformation over the past few years as a result of the war in Ukraine, Russia’s aggressive foreign policy and the NATO memberships of Finland and Sweden. These changes will have long-term effects on Finland’s operating environment as well.

This research bulletin addresses the drivers of change of the Finnish future operating environment based on the study of the Finnish Defence Research Agency. It argues that the future operating environment may have different outlooks but they include common denominators that should be taken in account. Moreover, the future requires Finland to reconsider its traditional ethos of survival for navigating in the increasingly volatile operating environment.

The operating environment is not seen just as a physical environment but as including also the cognitive and virtual dimensions. For a front-line state an operating environment is essentially the area in which operations are conducted to defend its territory. This does not mean that the operating environment is limited inside the national borders – the boundaries of the operating environment will depend on the context.

Drivers of change of the Finnish future operating environment

The Finnish future operating environment will be shaped by various drivers. Each driver is manifested in and affecting the operating environment in several ways. The five major drivers of changes and their manifestations are summarised in Figure 1.

First, the framework of the Finnish future operating environment will be established by general rules and the modus operandi of great power competition, the presence and the role of the great powers – the US, China and Russia – in the surroundings of Finland as well as the increasing significance of the Arctic within the context of great power competition. To certain extent, these external factors determine the preconditions, the agenda and the character of the operating environment.

Second, Finland is affected daily by threats that are directly derived from the immediate security environment. Russia is a permanent military threat to Finland. The war in Ukraine has proved that the Russian rationale of the use of military power is different from the Western one. Russia is ready to endure huge losses to achieve its goals. Moreover, Russia is ready to use hostile measures below the threshold of open use of military force in order to weaken the cohesion of the Finnish society and hamper its vital functions. These two factors will remain at the core of the Finnish future operating environment.

Great power competition	Rules and the modus operandi of great power competition	Warfare and military capabilities	Changing character of war
	The United States’ commitment to Europe		Military capabilities and disruptive technologies
	China’s role in Europe		Role of nuclear weapons
	Russia’s great power aspirations		Impact of climate and environmental change on warfare
	Great power competition in the Arctic region		
Threats emerging from security environment	Russia as a military threat	Society and total defence	Willingness to defend and conscription
	Hybrid influencing by Russia		Psychological resilience and ability to function in society
Finland’s alliances and partnerships	Significance of partnerships		Resources of military national defence
	European Union		Differentiation of regions
	NATO		Security of supply
	Bi- and multilateral defence cooperation	Global enterprises and influential people	

Figure 1. The drivers of change in Finland’s operating environment 2040 and their manifestations.



Third, alliances and partnerships are vital for Finland in the future, volatile world. They are one important cornerstone of the security of a small front-line state. However, perceptions of the significance and the premises of the cooperation may vary. Some countries may see the cooperation with Finland having an intrinsic value. For others, the cooperation may seem more transactional – it must provide concrete and immediate benefits. The prospects of the cooperation will be influenced by this perception.

NATO and its future will directly shape the future operating environment. From the Finnish perspective, it is crucial that Northern Europe and the Arctic will remain and even increase their significance in NATO, ensuring the effective deterrence and defence in the region. Detailed planning, readiness to execute the plans as well as sufficient capabilities and other resources are vital – but not guaranteed – preconditions of maintaining the status quo.

European Union (EU) is a framework which impacts on the operating environment primarily through co-development of national military capabilities, support of European defence industry and enhancing security of supplies including military mobility.

The key question in terms of NATO and the EU is how they can integrate various European security needs to balanced, coherent and capable entity. One tool to foster this aim is bi- and multilateral defence cooperation. Cooperation should not be seen as a competing effort with NATO and EU, but rather as complementing one. For example, the UK-led defence cooperation framework Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) could have a role below the threshold of the NATO article V, facilitating a more integrated European security architecture.

Fourth, the evolving character of war and development of military capabilities may shape the future operating environment significantly. Perceptions of the utility and legitimacy of military force as an instrument of power may vary among the states, affecting the character of war. If military force becomes even more legitimate, it may lower the threshold of military aggression and make it more and more usual.

Military capabilities and disruptive technologies have a potential to change the future operating environment. Artificial intelligence, quantum technology, autonomic systems, use of space and new materiel are the most important factors that may entail changes in the operating environment.

However, the balance between new capabilities utilising disruptive technologies and old, so-called legacy capabilities, will potentially have different alternatives. The future relative significance of emerging capabilities is not clear. Furthermore, the dynamics of the battlefield do not necessarily transform decisively, if counter-measures develop at the pace of new technologies.

Nuclear weapons will be part of the future operating environment. The crucial question is to what extent they will become a part of actual warfare or rather remain as a way of establishing deterrence.

Climate change is one aspect affecting warfare that cannot be ignored. The average temperature will rise and the frequency of unusual weather conditions will increase. However, within 15 years' perspective it seems plausible that the Finnish operating environment will still include four seasons. The difficulty is that assumptions

concerning e.g. the amount of snow and ice do not necessarily apply any more, which will complicate military planning and operations.

Fifth, the Finnish society and total defence create an important framework for Finland to operate in now and in the future. As a small state, Finland has to utilise all the resources of the society. Willingness to defend the country and conscription provide cornerstones for the defence system based on the large reserve. However, decreasing population, citizens' weakening psychological and physical capacity and changing attitudes in the society pose uncertainties on the future of conscription. Moreover, it is not clear that people will retain the same level of resilience as today.

A main element of resilience, confidence among the citizens and towards institutions, may weaken due to societal polarisation and differentiation of the personal life experiences. This development will possibly be strengthened by regional differentiation, which may also cause direct physical implications on the operating environment by decaying infrastructure.

Resources of military defence are not necessarily guaranteed in the future. Finland's financial situation is unpromising, causing pressure on budget cuts and tax increases. In this situation, there are competing needs for public funding. Possibly mitigating threat environment may further increase willingness to direct resources to other sectors of the society. Additionally, the output of military investments may be unsure due to raising prices and multifaceted threat environment.

Security of supply is a critical element of societal defence efforts. It is increasingly important to commit international partners – also in private sector – to the cooperation, avoiding disadvantageous dependencies.

Navigating through the comprehensive unrest

The Finnish future operating environment may have different outlooks depending on the development of the above-mentioned drivers of change. Outlining the developments following the relevant alternative future pathways of the drivers of change opens up varying views on the operating environment.

The most fundamental question determining the character of the operating environment is the use of military force – is it a means of intimidation or a tool of actual warfare? Due to this difference, it is important to keep in mind two possible developments: A continuously turbulent operating environment without open use of military force and a war in Northern Europe affecting Finland.

In all cases the future operating environment includes much uncertainty caused by the adversary, emerging new actors and evolving partnerships. Hecticness and unrest characterise the operating environment where several disruptions may take place simultaneously and there may not be time to recover from them. Military national defence must be seen as a layered effort which considers both deterrence, adversary's quick and surprising use of military force and large-scale warfare. The latter option underlines the importance of defence industrial foundations.

In a small state like Finland, military national defence needs the resources of the whole society, both now and also in the future. Thus, the legitimacy of the activities in the eyes of the Finnish people constitutes a vital prerequisite for successful operations. The society



must be protected both physically and mentally in order to face multifaceted future threats.

In the hectic and restless future, external actors will still determine the constraints of Finland's operating environment. Nevertheless, Finland should avoid short-sighted, reactive activity and keeping the defence system in constant overdrive. This might require reconsideration of certain principles and presumptions concerning military national defence. The defence system which draws a distinction between war and peace has a bearing on legislation, powers, organisational structures, resources and operating culture, among other things. These issues should be handled in order to act with an adversary to which no such distinction exists.

The traditional Finnish ethos of survival is a viable approach that is constantly present, in some way or another, in an increasingly uncertain operating environment. This ethos stems from the Finnish mindset and historical experiences. The literal or cynical interpretation of survival may, however, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a member of NATO, Finland has better chances of influencing its own future. When operating opportunities open up, they should be leveraged actively.

For more information

Major (OF-3), Master of Social Sciences Antti Pihlajamaa is a principal scientist at the Concept and Doctrine Division in Finnish Defence Research Agency.