

NATO countries increase military activity in Finland

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Since May, there has been an observable increase in military activity by NATO member states, primarily the United States and the United Kingdom, on Finnish territory. The Ryske 22 and Vigilant Fox land exercises, involving 750 soldiers each, were completed by 31 July. The former took place in the northern regions of the country, beyond the Arctic Circle. Mechanised companies from Sweden, Norway and the USA participated, with support from helicopters. For Finland, this was the largest military exercise to be held in the Arctic Circle area with foreign partners since the end of the Second World War. The Vigilant Fox manoeuvres were conducted in the south-western part of the country and involved air assault companies from the US and the United Kingdom assisted by helicopters. American and British helicopters have been practising in Finland since mid-July, as has the British company from the NATO Battlegroup deployed in Estonia. In addition, in June and July US Special Forces conducted joint exercises with their Finnish counterparts in the region between Helsinki and the Finnish-Russian border.

Other joint air and naval exercises between Finland and selected NATO countries have also taken place in recent weeks. At the end of May, four British Eurofighters exercised with Swedish and Finnish fighters in the north of Finland. During the Alliance summit in Madrid, a pair of British F-35s took part in exercises with Finnish F/A-18 Hornet fighters in the central part of the country. At the beginning of July, French Mirage aircraft practised with Swedish and Finnish fighters, and in the middle of the month, they were replaced by British F-35s and Eurofighters. At the beginning of August, the US amphibious assault ship USS *Kearsarge* and a unit of US Marines held joint exercises with the Finnish Navy along the coast west of Helsinki, while in July the US guided missile destroyer USS *Arleigh Burke* held manoeuvres with Swedish and Finnish ships.

Commentary

- NATO's largest member states have been expanding their military presence in Finland since May 2022, but the forces they have sent to participate in training and exercises are relatively modest. Their presence is intended to deter Moscow from taking aggressive actions against Helsinki during the NATO accession process, since Finland (like Sweden) cannot yet enjoy protection under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The increase in allied military activity in Finland is mainly due to its long land border with Russia. The subunits from the US, UK and France taking part in these training and exercises come from units that are currently deployed and rotated on the eastern flank. NATO's military activity is a confirmation of the informal security guarantees given to Finland and Sweden by the US, UK, Poland, France and Germany, among others. The British

government is the only one to have signed bilateral political declarations of solidarity with both countries, which include provisions on assuring British military support in the event of aggression. However, these are not legally binding (see [Sweden and Finland on the threshold of NATO membership](#)). The increased presence of the NATO members is important because of the initial fears of the Finnish and Swedish governments that Russia may launch aggressive military moves against both countries.

- The concern in terms of potential hostile moves by the Russians, however, is not currently based on fears of an open invasion, but about military provocations, hybrid actions or cyber-attacks against critical infrastructure in Finland and Sweden. As Russian troops which had previously been permanently stationed near the Finnish border have now been sent to participate in the invasion of Ukraine, fears of conventional armed aggression by the Russian Federation have decreased in both countries. Russia has three army brigades and a naval infantry brigade permanently deployed along the border with Finland (and further north, with Norway). Between St Petersburg and the border with Finland, the 138th Guards Separate Motor Rifle Brigade is stationed; elements of this unit are now involved in the invasion of Ukraine. Beyond the Arctic Circle, the 80th Arctic Motor Rifle Brigade is based in Alakurtti. Satellite images published by Finnish media show that both the military activity of this garrison and the number of troops and military equipment assembled there have been decreased. The 200th Separate Motor Rifle Brigade and the 61st Naval Infantry Brigade are deployed in the Pechenga area near the Russian-Norwegian border. Some of their troops were involved in heavy fighting near Kharkiv in late February and early March. In the border area with Finland Russia has also stationed two artillery brigades, two missile brigades, eight anti-aircraft missile regiments, three combat aviation regiments and support & maintenance formations. Some of them are now involved in the invasion of Ukraine. Given the degree of involvement of the entire Russian Armed Forces in this war and the lack of a declaration of general mobilisation, it must be assumed that Russia does not have the forces and resources needed to carry out a land invasion of Finland.
- Military cooperation between Finland & Sweden with the UK & US has been going on for decades, but it clearly intensified after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014. Since 2017, both countries have participated in the British military cooperation framework with Northern European countries, the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF). Since 2016, the Arrow exercises have been held every two years (in May), integrating companies and platoons from the US, the United Kingdom and other JEF partners with the Finnish brigade. This year, a British tank company participated for the first time. Also, every year since 2016, four fighters from the UK Royal Air Force have conducted joint exercises with the Finnish and Swedish air forces. This year, the number of Eurofighters doubled, and F-35B and French fighters were also included for the first time. Military cooperation with the United States and the participation of US forces in training & exercises in both countries has also intensified since 2014 (see [Pro-American non-alignment. Sweden and Finland develop closer military co-operation with the United States](#)).