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North Star

Why Australia should look to Finland on resilience and preparedness

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Key points

- In this era of worsening global risk and the questioning of alliances, Australia's security demands whole-of-nation preparedness and resilience. This means commitment, coordination and the ability to mobilise all sectors of society, far beyond anything the nation has known since the Second World War.
- A priority should be to engage best-practice approaches to national security among those democracies that have already learned the hard way.
- Finland is a proven leader in comprehensive security and self-reliance, and is already a model for Europe. While physically distant, its closeness in values and security outlook make it a promising partner for Australia.
- Shared interests will grow in a global theatre of strategic risk. Both nations face authoritarian pressure on their maritime lifelines such as undersea cables. Both need to prioritise whole-of-nation resilience, whatever adversaries – or allies – may have in mind.

Policy recommendations

- Australia and Finland should build an innovative security partnership involving policy dialogue and exchanges of expertise.
- A core dialogue could involve the resilience and preparedness teams within the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the preparedness unit in the Finnish Prime Minister's Office. Priority topics should include preparedness, mobilisation and critical infrastructure protection, including undersea cables. Talks could broaden across a wider range of agencies, with exchanges of technical expertise and intelligence on hybrid threats.
- In line with a whole-of-nation security ethos, Government engagement would be supported by dialogue involving experts and educators, drawing in parliamentarians, industry and civil society.

Why Australia needs whole-of-nation security

For Australia, as for other democracies around the world, hazards are accumulating. Strategic threats – involving the use of armed force and other dimensions of state power for coercion and leverage – are overlapping with transnational risks. Globalisation and disruptive technologies have eroded boundaries between international and domestic issues, and between economics and security.

For decades, Australia has treated national security as the preserve of its armed forces, intelligence capabilities, specialist security bureaucracy and statecraft, in close alliance with the United States. Not since the Second World War has an Australian government made a sustained effort to engage the much larger national potential – including industry, unions, subnational government, the research sector, non-government organisations, parliament and the citizenry itself – in protecting the nation's interests, values and identity from a dangerous international environment.

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But in a disrupted and connected world, threats are gathering to a 'polycrisis'. For Australia, the list is long. It includes the impacts of climate change including intense natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, China's military and economic coercion, foreign interference, terrorism, extremism, disinformation, the impact of Middle East conflict on social cohesion, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and grave uncertainties about the direction of US strategic policy under the second Trump administration. Major war or brink-of-war crises in Australia's Indo-Pacific region are highly plausible possibilities.

In determining what to do, and how, the Australian Government would be well advised to examine best-practice approaches to security among those nations that have already learned the hard way how to marshal their full capabilities for self-protection. Australia can learn a little from many places. It could learn a lot from a small democracy that is far away and not historically a close partner: Finland.

The Finnish way: from *Total Defence* to *Comprehensive Security*

The map shows why Finland has taken security seriously ever since its independence from Russia in 1917. It shares a 1343-kilometre land border with Russia, and Moscow has often coveted its territory, or at least the subversion of its sovereignty. The *Total Defence* model emerged in Finland in the 1950s following the harsh lessons of the Second World War: that fighting a war of attrition against a numerically superior enemy, the then Soviet Union, requires harnessing a society's full capabilities.

Total Defence involved the ability to mobilise all elements of state power for national defence against military aggression. This was centred on heavy land forces with large numbers of reservists trained through conscription. By the 2000s, however, *Total Defence* was outdated. The economic liberalisation of the 1990s had transferred much critical infrastructure, services and production into private hands. The defence forces had become dependent on resources and capabilities available only from the private sector, with essential services, such as food supply, logistics, transport and communications, principally supplied by business.

At the same time, society had become more complex, reflecting the diverse expectations of citizens. The widening threat landscape shaped by megatrends such as globalisation, digitalisation, and climate change demanded a new framework. This shifted to a broader concept of security, aimed at guarding a broad range of vital societal functions against "all hazards". What was needed was a model to integrate many policy areas, including defence, internal security, diplomacy and the economy. A whole-of-government framework would need also to extend to the whole of society, including non-government organisations and the volunteer sector, along with businesses, unions, education, media, and even religious communities.

The first strategy for comprehensive security was released in 2012. The second version, the 2017 *Security Strategy for Society*,[1] stated that Finnish preparedness is grounded in a concept of *Comprehensive Security* "meaning that the vital functions of society are to be jointly safeguarded by the authorities, businesses, NGOs and citizens"[2]. *Comprehensive Security* also took an "all hazards" approach to incorporate a multitude of threats and risks, not only conventional war but including disinformation, food security, terrorism, pandemics, natural disasters, and cyber. It also considered how interconnected risks have cascading effects. The latest strategy, released in January 2025, incorporates lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and adds responses to crises and disruptions alongside preparedness.[3] It puts more emphasis on the role of citizens in building resilience. All three documents have been actively backed by resourcing and policy coordination: a sign that national security strategies can make a difference.

Public-private sector cooperation is key. Cooperation for preparedness of critical infrastructure, services and production is organised into six sectors and 27 mostly industry-specific 'pools' of a National Emergency Supply Organisation. These cover many essential areas, notably: energy distribution; communications networks; financial services; water and food supply; pharmaceuticals and healthcare services; and technology, services and production critical to national defence. The pools coordinate preparedness planning and exercises. They also maintain a situational picture together with the relevant authorities in each sector.

The education dimension

Education also plays a critical role in security and is one area where the 20th Century *Total Defence* model was ahead of its time. Since 1961, intensive courses have brought together leaders from all sectors of society for practical education in defence and security. These include specialised briefings from experts, participation in an extended crisis and decision-making simulation, field visits, and the creation of trusted networks.

The result is an active alumni of key individuals from across the public sector, parliament, political parties, business, unions, NGOs, universities, science, technology, media and the cultural sector. Together with defence leaders, they are informed about roles, expectations, and legal powers as a ready basis for working together in a real-world contingency. Now in its seventh decade, this national defence course has trained more than 10,000 leaders, while more than 60,000 participants have joined complementary programs at a regional level.

Adapting *Comprehensive Security* to new realities

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 shocked the whole European security order, with ongoing global repercussions. However, unlike most European countries, Finland was well prepared for war.

Having never abandoned conscription and reserves, Finland had one of the largest and most capable militaries in Europe, with a fully trained and equipped battle force of 280,000 and more than 900,000 reservists. In addition to military service, reservists can be assigned to civil defence, whilst critical workers in various industries and services are exempt from armed service. Finland had heavily invested in civil defence since the early Cold War. It has more than 50,000 shelters capable of safely accommodating 4.8 million of its 5.6 million population.

Moreover, Finland never abandoned the material preparedness needed to rapidly establish a war economy. Its strategic stockpiles cover a broad range of critical materials and resources, including pharmaceuticals and five to six months' worth of fuels and grain. Above all, the citizens' will to defend is among the highest in Europe. In a 2022 survey, 83 per cent of Finns indicated they were ready to fight to defend their country, even if the outcome would be uncertain.[4]

Nonetheless, the cold face of Russian aggression and the traumatic challenge it posed to European security prompted a major policy shift by Finland. It abandoned a longstanding position by applying to join NATO in May 2022, together with Sweden. Finland is now learning to reconcile its traditional focus on sovereign capabilities and solutions with alliance commitments. This new policy balance is itself under fresh challenge in early 2025, with the Trump administration's bewildering stance on Ukraine and trans-Atlantic solidarity. However, whatever the future of NATO, Finland is likely to play an outsized role in European security arrangements.

Many NATO and EU countries are turning to the Finnish example in comprehensive security and resilience. The EU Preparedness Union concept by the new commission, outlined in a 2024 report by former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö,[5] proposes a model for the EU that largely emulates the Finnish achievement.

Practical dialogue to build resilience

Every country has unique circumstances and aspirations. Political systems and cultures affect goals and decisions, while geography and history influence threat perceptions and prioritisation. But some countries still have enough commonalities to benefit from each other's experience, and to make partnership worth pursuing.

Australia has deep links of interests, values, identity and institutional trust with its Five Eyes security and intelligence partners, however much these may be challenged in the case of Trump's America. Canberra has also built more recent cooperation with Indo-Pacific powers, most substantially Japan. In a connected world, it also makes sense to look for leading security practices wherever they may be found, beyond the familiar strengths and deficiencies of Anglosphere partners.

Australia and Finland share fundamental beliefs in democracy, human rights, equality, mutual respect, the rule of law and – however imperilled – a global system based on the sovereign equality of nations.[6] They face similar risks, including climate change, authoritarian coercion, great-power conflict, foreign interference, social cohesion challenges, cyber threats and critical infrastructure vulnerability. Even the geographic context is not as different as it seems. Australia contends with isolation as an island continent with a relatively small population, focused on protecting its maritime trade and connectivity. Finland is the most sparsely populated country in Europe, and sees its own strategic geography as an island separated by the Baltic, with as acute a dependence on seaborne trade as Australia's: hence its alarm at recent sabotage of undersea cables. The Finnish Government has also expressed its interest in broadening collaboration with likeminded partners beyond the EU, Europe and NATO, specifically Australia, South Korea, Japan and Canada.[7]

An Australia-Finland security partnership would be limited realistically to dialogue and exchange of expertise. This could still have practical benefits in reinforcing each nation's resilience. The fact that each nation approaches parallel problems from different perspectives would make the exchange more fruitful. Each side could discover new ways to address common challenges, adapting them to local conditions. Just as Canberra can learn from Finnish *Comprehensive Security*, so too can Helsinki learn from Australia's experience in such areas as countering foreign interference, alliance management, intelligence oversight and disaster response.

How to proceed? A core dialogue could involve the resilience and preparedness teams within the Australian Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the preparedness unit in the Finnish Prime Minister's Office. Priority topics should include material preparedness, societal mobilisation and critical infrastructure protection, including undersea cables. Talks could broaden across a wider range of agencies, including those responsible for defence, foreign affairs, domestic resilience and intelligence. These could be augmented by exchanges of technical expertise and intelligence on hybrid threats. Assessments could be shared on the statecraft of how to manage great power relations and alliances.

In line with a whole-of-nation security ethos, Government engagement would be supported by a second track of dialogue involving security experts and educators, drawing in parliamentarians, industry and civil society. This could build on work under way through Finland's National Defence Course and Australia's ANU National Security College (NSC). In recent years NSC has stepped up its educational offerings and briefings for parliamentarians, subnational government, business and the wider community, with the Finnish model partly in mind.

In time, this national security education partnership could also go beyond the bilateral, connecting with other small and middle-power democracies such as Sweden, the Baltic states, New Zealand and Canada. NSC has previously convened dialogue among Australian, Finnish and Swedish security practitioners, and the authors have facilitated expert networks and research visits. The most likeminded nations may be oceans apart, but that does not stop them helping each other build resilience in a changed and confronting world.

Notes

1. Finnish Government 2017, *Security Strategy for Society*, accessed 11 March 2025, https://turvallisuuskomitea.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/YTS_2017_english.pdf.
2. The Comprehensive Security cluster in East-Finland replicates and adapts the model to meet regional needs. See Lonka, Harriet, "Comprehensive Security Cluster", Pohjois-Savo Regional Council, accessed 11 November 2024, https://www.pohjois-savo.fi/aluekehitys-ja-ohjelmatyo/kokonaisturvallisuuden-klusteri/in-english-2.html.
3. Finnish Government 2025, *Security Strategy for Society*, accessed 11 March 2025, https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/166026.
4. Vanttinen, Pekka, "Number of Finns willing to take arms to defend country at all-time high", Euractiv, 22 May 2022, accessed 11 November 2024, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/finns-willing-to-take-arms-to-defend-country-at-all-time-high/. In comparison, only 32 per cent of Europeans would be willing to fight. Gallup has not asked the same question in its Australian polling since 2014, when 29 per cent of Australians and 74 per cent of Finns indicated willingness to fight. Gallup 2015, "WIN/Gallup International's Global Survey Shows Three in Five Willing to Fight for Their Country ", accessed 11 March 2025, https://gallup.com.pk/bb_old_site/Polls/180315.pdf.
5. Niinistö, Sauli 2024, "Safer together: Strengthening Europe's civil and military preparedness and readiness: Report by Special Adviser Niinistö," European Commission, accessed 11 November 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/safer-together-path-towards-fully-prepared-union_en.
6. The *World Values Survey* identifies Australia, along with the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, as being closer in values to Nordic countries than to the United States or regional neighbours (*World Values Survey* 2024). For more details, see https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp.
7. Finnish Government 2023, "A strong and committed Finland: Programme of Prime Minister Petteri Orpo's Government", accessed 11 November 2024, https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/governments/government-programme#/.

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