

Peer-Reviewed Article

Nationalist justifications of realist policies: How Finnish parliamentary parties turned to favouring NATO membership

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Abstract

Russia's all-out-attack against Ukraine in late February 2022 caused a fast turnaround in Finland's public support for NATO membership that led the political parties, which had hitherto opposed joining NATO, to reconsider their stances. I argue that those parties, via their elites, employed a realist strategy of security, bolstered by political nationalism to express unity with the population to justify their shift, in an attempt to depoliticise the issue altogether. The premise of the study thus becomes the use of nationalism in explaining states joining international organisations rather than seeing it only as a disruptive force in interstate cooperation. The study also contributes to the previous scholarship on Finnish foreign policy and its different schools of thought by examining how nationalism plays a part in the realms of security and national interest. Ultimately, the membership signals a Finnish foreign policy swing from idealism to classical realism in which Finland had hitherto been an anomaly. This study uses data collected from Finnish parliamentary parties' council conferences held between April and May 2022, where they formulated their stances.

Keywords

NATO, nationalism, political parties, idealism, realism

Introduction

The phrase ‘sudden change in our security environment’ became ubiquitous in Finland after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022. Now, political parties had to re-evaluate Finland’s position in the international system. President Sauli Niinistö’s comments on how NATO membership would be, “the most adequate safety measure as there is nothing beyond it” (Yle, 2022a) summed up the sentiment for applying for NATO membership. While the decision to join NATO may seem obvious in light of the changed public opinion, an exploration of the communication strategies of the political elite regarding the decision is a useful area of inquiry. Previous studies (e.g., Nortio et al., 2022) show that framing Russia as a “threatening national other” has been used to both oppose and support Finland’s NATO status. Stemming from Finland’s history and its geographical location as a western borderland, the Cold War era of *Realpolitik*, i.e., neutral pragmatism (Raudaskoski, 2019), has continued to play its part in Finland’s foreign and security policy (FFSP). The decision to apply for NATO membership constituted a true *Mini-Sattelzeit* in FFSP when traditional adages of neutrality, non-alignment and non-membership in military alliances became lacklustre in the face of a volatile Russia.

Only a month before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, then prime minister Sanna Marin had said that Finland applying for NATO membership would be “very unlikely” even if Russia attacked Ukraine (Reuters, 2022). Prior to February 2022, only a quarter of Finns supported NATO membership, but in March 2022, this share rose to 60% of the population (Yle, 2022b). This Gallup democracy instigated the political elite to act as well (Kanniainen, 2022; Weckman, 2023). Acknowledging the public opinion, political parties in Finland were pressed to re-evaluate their positions on the topic. Such a major shift in policy position needs to be sold to the public with a strategy that does not portray the parties as inconsistent. Valuable scholarly analysis of the parliamentary discussions has already been carried out (Linnainmäki, 2023), but in the parliament MPs seek more to explain their views to each other. This article examines how the parties formed their stances to supporters and other citizens before conveying them in the parliamentary arena. In fact, all the Finnish parliamentary parties’ executive organs held supplementary meetings to formulate their NATO stances, which are used as this article’s data.

Finland’s decision appears to be a textbook example of Morgenthauian classical realism where small states join alliances against a larger adversary in an anarchic international system (Morgenthau, 1973). However, realism and its principle of unitarity is not enough to answer the question whether a state exists for its own sake or for the sake of its people. It still needs to show *how* the unitarity is reached. This is done by adding the component of nationalism into the analytical framework, in building the state and nation as unitary and “congruent” (Gellner, 2006, p. 1). The current academic landscape seems to hold nationalism accountable for international conflicts and exacerbating the fracturing of global governance (Shukla, 2018). In addition, nationalism is sometimes used interchangeably with populism (see Vulović and Palonen, 2023). This blending of concepts has led to the coining of the term ‘neonationalism’ when talking about the movements that led to phenomena, such as Brexit and Trump (Blyth, 2016; Fukuyama, 2016). In these instances, nationalism has been used to explain states’ *withdrawal* from international organisations (Von Borzyskowski and Vabulas, 2019). In comparison, much less research utilises the idea of nationalism to explain states *joining* international organisations.

Previous studies have shown Finland’s relationship with NATO to be complex and open to many interpretations (e.g., Särkkä, 2019; Forsberg, 2018). Equally, the studies about FFSP in general have

elucidated multi-tiered considerations about the construction of the concept varying on all the levels of IR theory (e.g., Pesu, 2019; Haukkala and Vaahtoranta, 2016; Aaltola, 2003). This study takes into account the discussion of FFSP regarding main variants of IR theory while evaluating policy decisions done through these lenses as well. This article answers Tuomas Forsberg's (2023, pp. 93–95) call for foreign policy research to open up new points of view without the need to be directly connected to questions about the “general orientation” of Finnish foreign policy, but to advance “theoretical pluralism” in asking questions of “how” and “why”.

This study acts as a contribution to the scholarship on Finnish foreign policy and its different schools of thought by identifying a constructivist shift from idealism to realism via nationalism. I propose that Finnish parliamentary parties employed political nationalism as a realist strategy, to explain their change in policy position in favour of NATO membership to respect the idea of consensus in foreign policy decisions. I argue that Finnish decision-makers operated in the interplay between three elements: realism, nationalism and constructivism. The decision to join NATO is a realist one; the elite conveyed the argument to join to the public through nationalism; and a past of constructivist identity seeking allowed Finland to find itself in the position to actually do so.

Finland's foreign and security policy: theories and schools

Finnish foreign and security policy has been characterised as walking the tightrope between being as West-oriented as possible without needlessly provoking neighbouring Russia's security concerns. In this searching of space to manoeuvre, Finland has inched towards idealism in its foreign and security policy while never abandoning its realist roots. Seen this way, Finland's decision to join NATO does not seem like a disruption but a buttress of an existing notion (cf. Ferreira-Pereira, 2006). The idealist effort to move closer to the West was done through constructivism, which expanded the space for manoeuvre that allowed the realist tenet of security maximisation to eventually flourish. However, when it comes to the actual NATO membership application process, constructivism's explanatory powers are limited as Finland had already cemented its position as a Western country and had no need for further identity building. What Finland had to do was to show its citizens how the shift towards military alliance and classical realism was done in the national interest.

This shift can be analysed through the discussion of schools of thought regarding FFSP (Haukkala and Vaahtoranta, 2016; Pesu, 2017; Juntunen, 2018; Linnainmäki, 2023). Hiski Haukkala and Tapani Vaahtoranta talk about the schools of thought as being “analytical lenses” (2016, p. 61). For Matti Pesu, they are “conceptual frameworks” with which to outline ways of thinking about foreign policy in a very general level (2017, p. 285). In other words, the schools cannot be called ‘theories’ in the broad sense – even if they have their basis in IR theories – but they offer conceptualisations of different strategies to pursue. The schools can also overlap, in that in many decisions we can see different explanations (Juntunen, 2018, p. 40).

Haukkala and Vaahtoranta (2016) outline Finnish security policy by identifying three schools of thought in whose interplay Finland operates. In *small state realism* Finland focuses on its geopolitical situation next to Russia, *Euro-Atlanticism* has a liberalist focus where nurturing Western relations is advocated, and *globalism* has the aspiration to be rid of power politics altogether towards a cosmopolitan world of mutual norms, rules and institutions. Drawing from this notion, I position FFSP into a dimension between realism and idealism to which the different schools align. The point here is not to compare the FFSP schools of thought with theories of international relations, but to see how the FFSP schools are actually built from IR theories. I will look at realism and its role as a ‘grand’ theory in international relations more deeply below. Idealism is not such a theory in itself but it does

function as a useful organising principle opposite to realism (Griffiths, 1992).

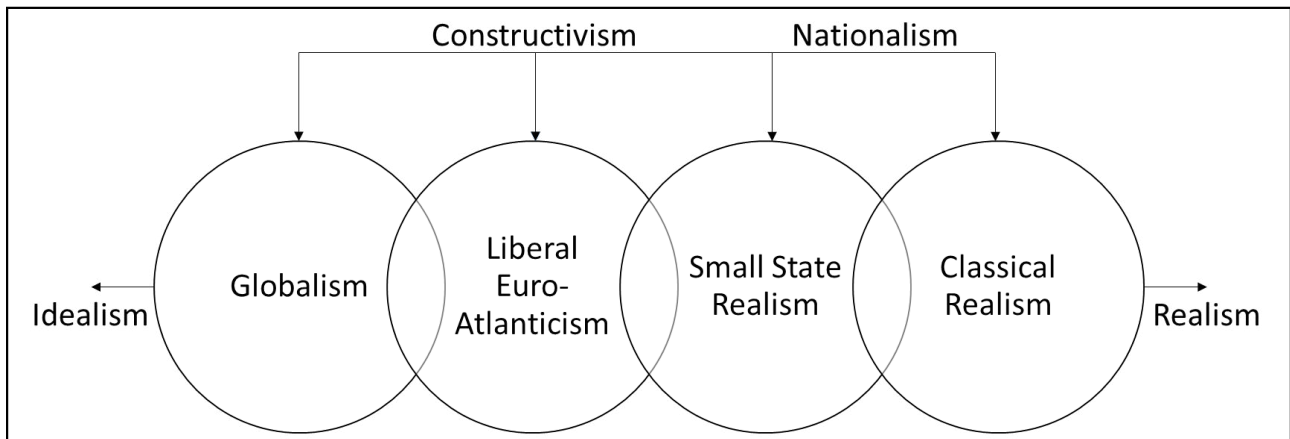


Figure 1. Finnish foreign and security policy dimension regarding NATO membership

In Figure 1, I have laid out the FFSP dimension regarding NATO membership. It outlines the different theories of IR as spheres and places them appropriately on a continuum of idealism–realism. Above the spheres, I have laid out the path of Finland in its position seeking on the international stage, and labelled the manoeuvring strategies employed. It shows how the idealist shift towards globalism is done constructively, namely trying to transcend the realm of power politics altogether (Wendt, 1992; more below). With the NATO membership, however, Finland could not ignore its primacy and sought to make a shift towards realism – which it never truly abandoned. However, as the decision was to be done from the premises of ensuring national interest (i.e., survival), this could not be done in traditional constructivist terms and required another component to explain the shift: nationalism.

The realism-idealism continuum

The school of thought with the most realist disposition is appropriately classical realism. It acknowledges the realist tenet of anarchy in the global system where states' ultimate objective is to maximise security. However, where in (classical) realism states tend to counter security imbalances through forming alliances, for Finnish small state realism this is not the case. Until May 2022, Finland had an official policy of not seeking membership in a military alliance, even if it was on a road to ever deepening alignment with NATO seen through peacekeeping operations abroad and joint military exercises, which all worked towards removing barriers of deeper partnership. Without the deterrent of military alliance, Finnish small state realism demanded the building up of national defence capacities and capabilities – the epitomes of Finnish sovereignty. This was done even while maintaining amicable bilateral relations with Russia still after the first Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014. In 2018, Helsinki was the location for a meeting between presidents Trump and Putin, crystallising Finland's continuing endeavour as a mediator and bridge-builder between West and East (Aaltola, 2003).

Indeed, ever since the Cold War came to an abrupt end, Finland sought to further its identity-construction towards the West (Aunesluoma and Raino-Niemi, 2016, p. 51), heralding the advent of Euro-Atlanticism. It is more idealist than small state realism due to its emphasis on Western liberal institutions and values, focussing on economic – and not security – gains. This is why I choose to further delineate this school as *liberal* Euro-Atlanticism in order to emphasise the school's orientation away from realist power politics and more into identity and economic issues (e.g., Browning, 2008). It is noteworthy that Haukkala and Vaahtoranta do admit the terms liberalism and Euro-Atlanticism

can be used interchangeably (2016, p. 58). Another cause to position Euro-Atlanticism as more idealist than small state liberalism is that it also has (or at least had) the idealist notion of containing Russia through trade and advocating democracy and human rights.

Like stated, in liberal Euro-Atlanticism the focus is extensively towards the West. It sees membership of the European Union bringing significant economic and political advantages to Finland, for instance. The late president Martti Ahtisaari, who presided over Finland's accession to the EU, mused that simultaneous membership applications to both the EU and NATO would have been too much to handle for the Finnish people (Ahtisaari et al., 2016). This can be seen as another extension of the school's liberalist focus over realism where matters of the economic surpassed those of security (see Ingebritsen, 1998). However, it must be stated that in the mid-1990's, Finnish NATO membership would not have been that easy to accomplish as it was in 2022–23 and would have perhaps needlessly jeopardised the EU accession. Secondly, the security environment of the mid-1990's was much less hostile than after February 2022. In addition to stronger European dimensions and integration, Euro-Atlanticism advocates for deeper cross-Atlantic couplings. One illustration of this is the United States becoming Finland's largest trading partner in 2022 (Hamilton and Quinlan, 2023).

It is important to highlight the liberal emphasis of the school because 'realist' Euro-Atlanticism would be nothing more than classical realism (of which more below). Having said that, Euro-Atlanticism does have a limited realist bent which can be seen in President Koivisto's statement that Finland's membership in the EU serves first and foremost the security dimension of Finland as the rationale was that no country would be willing to attack the Union (Raudaskoski, 2019). This only lends more explanatory power to the original point of aligning of the schools in realism vs. idealism terms.

To show Finland's interest in spreading Western values, human rights and democratic institutions all around the world, a school of globalism was construed. It is the most ideal (i.e., non-realist) due to its disregard to power politics completely. The central tenet for globalism, in turn, is a rules-based world order and governance in order to solve universal problems such as environmental issues, promotion of gender equality and eradicating global poverty. This Finland has advocated for and been active in the EU and various UN institutions. The globalist school can thus be characterised as explicitly normative. After the February 2022 transgressions against this purported rules-based order, also the globalists had to admit that power politics could not be ignored in its entirety.

Security and unity

Analysing the parliamentary discussion around Finland's NATO membership proceedings, Joel Linnainmäki (2023) identified that advocates of both small state realism and Euro-Atlanticism ultimately acknowledged the 'real' in their schools of thought, emphasising security. Another significant finding of Linnainmäki (ibid.) was that previous advocates of small state realism employed nationalist rhetoric in their argumentation. Exactly this national(ist) dimension has been overlooked in the discussion regarding FFSP schools. I develop this notion further, hypothesising that all the parliamentary parties utilised nationalist discursive strategies to express unity in the demanding times when justifying their pivots to realism.

Realism

As Finland already had such rootedness in realist thinking regarding its FSP, the full pivot towards classical realism demonstrated by the NATO membership was not very cumbersome. Another particular dimension of the national interest in FFSP has been *consensus seeking* in the parliamentary institutions (Särkkä, 2019). Seen in a positive light, decisions regarding FFSP are done after careful

deliberation with the objective to attain as large a unanimity as possible. This makes FFSP predictable and consistent as it ensures consistency no matter what government configuration Finland might have. The negative consequence is that it might lead to a limited freedom of expression. David Arter (1987, p. 100) speaks of “compulsory consensus” in the Cold War context of being as amicable as possible towards the Soviets, limiting critique. In the current context, we might term the NATO membership discussion as ‘compulsory consensus 2.0’ as the decision had to be as unanimous as possible in order to be future-proof. Put differently, parties were inhibited from politicising the issue, indicating they had to be creative in their framing of their formulation of stances. I draw a framework of just how creative next.

In realism, states are the key units of analysis, as they are the principal actors in the international system (Morgenthau, 1975, p. 3). States are considered as rational agents whose *raison d'état* is to maximise their prospects for survival. Due to the international system being anarchic by nature, meaning that there is no central authority, a realist perspective is useful for predicting nation-state behaviour security-wise. States are seen as self-help agents responsible for their own survival; they define their own interests and pursue power and international influence (Waltz, 1979). The key concept is power, especially material power, to deter, defend, and retaliate against possible aggressors to resolve conflicts.

The power capacities between states grow unequally, as some states have more material goods to increase their military power than others. To balance this inequality out, states will always anticipate worst-case scenarios and are expected to seek “the redistribution of power in one’s own favour through preventive wars or coalitions” (Kapitonenko, 2022, pp. 36–7). States’ pooling of power and resources through coalition formation is a well-examined phenomenon in realist literature regarding NATO (see, e.g., Hyde-Price, 2016). Now, the scenario certainly applies in the Finnish case as well: Finland maximises its military power and capacity through an alliance to avoid the worst-case scenario of war that could threaten the existence of Finland.

The core assumption of rationality in reality stems from Morgenthau’s (1975) general idea that human nature is primarily self-interested and seeking power, and to advance ambitions is to act rationally. This notion is applied to states, and to say that states are rational is to look at their actions in working towards this goal of amassing power and maximising security. To reach this goal, states behave in a consistent, calculated and predictable manner. This idea of rational maximisation of self-interest we can also call “egoistic” (Niebuhr, 1932, p. 198). However, not all egoistic behaviour is necessarily rational, only the kind that is done for one’s own good and not for one’s own ‘bad’. In this article, the rationality assumption is not needed to be taken at face value. It only suffices to say that states do act egoistically, and how these actions can be portrayed as rational is the focus of the analysis. Whether parties and their representatives actually *are* rational is not of the scope of this article, only the assumption that they wish to *be perceived* as such.

The assumption of rationality entails also the realist assumption of unitarity, meaning that the state is considered as one, single, integrated unit that functions as the basic unit of analysis in IR (Allison, 1971). With every particular issue, a unitary state forms a singular policy to attend to that issue. These issues have a hierarchy and national security tops the list as it is considered ‘high politics’ whereas economic and social issues are regarded as ‘low politics’. Thus, for realists, domestic contestation may occur in the realm of ‘low politics’, but when it comes to matters of security, military, or strategy a singular policy direction prevails. This we can see applying to Finland in its consensus seeking.

The realist approach does not assume that a country will choose a particular policy and maintain that policy over time. Instead, the realist approach only contends that the international system comprises

principal actors (states) that act rationally towards their goals at any point in time. Depending on the circumstances, the policy prescription for a country could be drastically different, even on matters of national defence. This approach does not argue that a state must act *ex nihilo*, nor does it deny that there are alternatives to reach their goal, only that a certain unitarity as well as unity is required for states to interact at the international level. How this unity is ultimately reached is the focus here.

I examine whether realist undertones are present in the parties' arguments and persuasive attempts to convince citizens of Finnish NATO membership being the correct move for the country. States are not taken as "billiard balls" (Joseph, 2014), but are constrained by domestic and societal issues that need resolving before action at the international level can be taken. This neoclassical realist understanding allows to account for the relationship between domestic politics and decision-making in the international arena (Ripsman et al., 2016). There is recognition with this approach that a singular figure cannot make a unilateral decision on topics of this magnitude in a democratic society. Instead, there is a deliberative process where politicians discuss pros and cons, and then these stakeholders must discuss with citizens regarding the strategies. Politicians must provide consistent and clear reasons for decisions in order to minimise dissent.

Nationalism

James D. Fearon (1998) argues that states' desire to survive and valuing security is but an assumption and not a consequence of anarchy or the international structure. In Wendtian terms we might call it a value-construction in the nation(-states) themselves based on ideas (Wendt, 1992). Even if states are the basic-unit with singular preference(s), they are not immutable; they can change and be changed. Consequently, the notion of states as unitary becomes simplifying while unrealistic. Be that as it may, state actors could still act according to the maxim that unity yields optimal results on a systemic level of IR, thus having an incentive to be at least perceived as such. This Finland has cherished with its consensus seeking. Parliamentary groups with different identities do play a key role in the outcomes of crises (Owen, 1997), but in the context of NATO membership, the public had already settled on the outcome. Now it was up to the decision-makers only to give the people what they wanted without politicising the issue. I argue that the reason behind this non-politicisation is nationalism.

With nationalism, we can bridge Morgenthau's epistemological leap of states' self-interest deriving from self-interested human nature. In fact, for realists, the national interest and state interest are becoming interchangeable in their lexicon (Kapitonenko, 2022, p. 25). A government must be aware of the character of the nation it governs in order to act efficiently and in an otherwise amoral realist international system. The "moral principle of national survival" is the sole motive to affect states' behaviour (Morgenthau, 1973, p. 166). Nationalism has that same exact tenet that realism has: that of ensuring the survival of the nation(-state). Michael C. Williams (2005, p. 78) has also identified this self-reflective dimension of realism, but regards it as problematic to characterise states as "acting units" with distinct, rational national interests. This is because states and especially nations are emotive as well as rational, and "political institutions are strongest when they cultivate an affective dimension of political association that fosters sub-rational and sentimental attachments within the community" (ibid). In other words, "nationalism and national identity are often the main if not the sole force" binding the society together as a nation-state (Prizel, 1998).

The centrality of the relationship between the state and nationalism exists in nationalism studies' branch of political nationalism. In it, nationalism is seen primarily as a form of politics, the central task of which is to obtain and use state power (Breuilly, 1993). Such actions are justified with nationalist arguments which is virtually a political doctrine built upon three basic assertions where (a) there exists

a nation with an explicit and peculiar character; (b) the interests and values of this nation take priority over all other interests and values; and (c) the nation must be as independent as possible. This usually requires at least the attainment of political sovereignty (ibid., p. 2). Conversely, it is the structure of the state that makes “it possible to conceive the nation as *unitary*” (Calhoun, 1997, p. 68; emphasis added).

Sovereignty can be seen as the ultimate form of agency, which is another feature that nationalism and realism have in common. Walker Connor indicates that “a nation must be self-defined” (1994, p. 103). Even though he discusses an ethnic base that forms this definition, political nationalism focuses on the actual *act* of this self-defining and on the agency and sovereignty it entails. In a similar vein, Ernest Gellner (2006, p. 73) argues that the state is used to try to impose a cultural homogeneity to reify the nation, but the cultural homogeneity is of zero importance to political nationalism – only that there is a large enough understanding of the “imagined *political* community” (Anderson, 2006, p. 6; emphasis added).

In addition to IR, power is a central concept of nationalism as well – certainly in its political sense. Nationalist movements must obtain power, which is in turn obtained through the state apparatus (Schnee, 2001, p. 10). Anthony D. Smith’s formulation of nationalism being “an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining the autonomy, unity, and identity of a nation” means that it is an ideology of “the nation, not the state” (1991, p. 74). The formation of a nation-state might not even be the end-goal for all nationalist movements, which has led Walter Schnee to state that the nation “ought to be the final arbiter of its own affairs” (2001, p. 6). That being said, nationalism certainly is disposed to pursue and attain state power so that the nation would be sovereign and as capable as possible to maintain it.

The attainment of power, agency, and sovereignty is just the first step of political nationalism because after self-determination is established, the aim then becomes one of self-preservation. Self-preservation can be accomplished through the upholding of symbolic manifestations of the nation (Billig, 1995) or more materialist means like joining a military alliance. Nationalism turns the realist assumption of being unitary into a rationale of unity in itself. If the realist interest is to survive, the national interest must be the national will to survive. Elie Kedourie has characterised nationalism as “an industrial lubricant” (1993, p. 144) when he talks of how nationalism aided in the success of the Industrial Revolution. Political nationalism characterises nationalism as a *security lubricant*, adding to the realist account. As Konstantinos Kostagiannis (2018) has suggested, better self-awareness through the idea of nationalism can lead to better understanding of realist policies.

Materials and method

I gathered data from council conferences of Finnish parliamentary parties to analyse their policy formation. In the parliamentary vote on May 17, 2022, 94% of Finnish members of parliament voted for applying for NATO membership. Such a display of uniformity required prior discussion and deliberation by the parties. Indeed, eight out of the ten Finnish parliamentary parties held a party council conference between April 9th and May 14th, which accounts for 99% of all MPs. It was in these conferences where the parties’ respective stances on NATO were established. The focus of my analysis is on the parties that previously were either against NATO or did not have an official stand on the issue.

I use qualitative content analysis to analyse the data. This allows for a systematic examination of the informational content present in the material in order to identify and compare the latent meaning structures from the textual content. I implement the method through the process of

inductive category formation where the main talking points of the data are first summarised and then categorised. Inductivity means here that the categories are largely derived from the data but in a theory-driven fashion insofar that they apply to the framework of security through unity. The categories are then applied to the data through close reading. As I am interested in finding if and how political nationalism is used as a realist strategy in the data, I do not employ quantitative measures such as analyses of frequency or valence. The goal is to understand a phenomenon and the processes it incorporates, not to make generalisations based on statistical inference. Saying that, it is assumed that due to the general character of some of the conferences, issues other than NATO will be brought up, which are not in the scope of this study.

Qualitative content analysis lends itself well to examining data from an open-ended data collection technique aimed at depth and detail. This is the case here as the data consists of materials gathered from the respective conferences the Finnish parliamentary parties held between April 4th and May 15th, 2022. The data mostly consist of speeches the main actors of the parties (chairs and ministers in government where applicable) gave. However, in some instances the speeches are supplemented by press conferences, press releases, and in the Centre Party’s case, a white paper on foreign policy. The dataset gathered has 21,905 words. Table 1 provides information on the general patterns of the data. The parties in government are presented first in order of the number of MPs they have in parliament. Then, the opposition parties are presented in a similar fashion. As stated before, all the parties either did not have an official NATO stance or were against it prior to February 2022, meaning that a change in their stances indeed occurred. It is in these conferences where the parties (re)formulated and expressed their respective stances on a possible NATO membership. Thus, the data contains a high level of comparability.

Table 1. Overview of the Data

Party	Type and date of conference	Decision	Data	# of words (%)
Social Democratic Party	Extra council conference, 14.5.2022	Support for NATO and for state leadership in membership talks (53-5-2)	Three speeches; press conference	6426 (29)
Centre Party	Council conference, 9.4.2022	Unanimous support for state and party leadership in applying for NATO membership	Three speeches; council’s “white paper” on FP	2818 (13)
Green League	Delegation conference, 23.4.2022	Unanimous support to parliamentary and ministerial group to act how they see fit, and reacts positively to possible NATO membership	Three speeches, press conference	4845 (22)
Left Alliance	Joint conference of the council and parliamentary group, 7.5.2022	Possible NATO membership application not a decisive issue for staying in government (52-10-1)	Press conference	2035 (10)
Finns Party	Council conference, 30.4.2022	Supports NATO membership (61-3)	Speech, press conference	5176 (24)
Christian Democrats	Extra council conference, 29.4.2022	Supports applying for NATO membership (43-6-1)	Press release	605 (3)

The data for the Social Democrats consists of three opening speeches, given by the chair of the party council and Minister of Local Government Sirpa Paatero, chair and Prime Minister Sanna Marin, and

chair of the parliamentary group Antti Lindtman. In addition, a press conference that was held was transcribed and added to the dataset. The data for the Centre Party consists of three opening speeches given by chair of the party council Liina Tiusanen, chair and Minister of Finance Annika Saarikko, and Minister of Defence Antti Kaikkonen. A white paper on foreign and security policies published by the party council also is analysed. The data for the Green League consists of three opening speeches given by acting leader of the party Iiris Suomela, chair of the parliamentary group Atte Harjanne, and Minister for Foreign Affairs Pekka Haavisto. A press conference held was transcribed and added to the dataset. Regarding the Left Alliance, their conference was held behind closed doors in its entirety, so only a press conference given afterwards was transcribed and included for analysis. The data for the Finns Party consists of an opening speech given by chair Riikka Purra, as well as a press conference that followed. Finally, the Christian Democrats circulated a press release that summarises the conference's decision, published in the party organ KD-Lehti. All the sources of the data are available online.

Analysis and discussion

When making policy decisions, parties need to consider two things: on what *grounds* they hold the decision important enough to be made and how to *justify* the actual decision. The analysis juxtaposes these with categories of security and unity to examine if nationalism is used as a realist strategy. This is illustrated in a fourfold table (Table 2) where the rows are ones of grounds and justifications, with the categories functioning as the columns. As parties need to have both grounds and justifications, they are placed in both of the rows, while the column depends on their argumentation. Considering the notion of rationality inherent to realism being the one that supersedes everything, it is seen as an either/or question. In other words, if a party is realist in its grounding of the issue, it is first and foremost that. If the grounds are then justified in a nationalist fashion they are positioned in the nationalist column in the row of justification.

Table 2. Parties' positions in stance formation regarding NATO membership

	Realist (security)	Nationalist (unity)
Grounds	Social Democrats Centre Party Green League Finns Party Christian Democrats	Left Alliance
Justification	Green League	Social Democrats Centre Party Left Alliance Finns Party Christian Democrats

A majority of the parties have their grounds in realism and justifications in nationalism. They frame the decision as a question of security while emphasising unity in making it. As a party, the Left Alliance cannot be seen to ground their decision through security and cannot be considered realist when it comes to NATO membership. Similarly, the Green League does not justify their decision through unity and cannot be considered nationalist. Five of the six parties provide the argument for their decision that NATO membership would maximise the security of Finland. In other words, for these parties the fundamental purpose of the state is to ensure the security of its citizens, which some parties explicitly affirm. Thus, the state needs to act now, and the parties must and will help it do so. They all draw attention to the change in the security environment of Finland and argue that what is happening

in Ukraine must not ever be allowed to happen in Finland. To put it in realist terms, these parties rationalise that the action of joining NATO is the right action to take security-wise. Interestingly, only the Finns Party and the Green League (although for different reasons) talk of how it is the time to cash in the so-called 'NATO-option'.

In addition, all of the parties emphasise the security that NATO would bring through its principle of collective defence articulated in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. They explicitly state that the security guarantees that NATO membership brings with it are the main element that ensure the survival of Finland, and must thus be taken advantage of. The parties also emphasise how the decision to apply for NATO membership is to be seen in defensive terms and not made in opposition to an enemy. The Centre Party states the purpose of joining NATO is to raise the repercussions for attacking Finland to such a height that it would never be attempted. Interestingly, only the Finns party actually use the word 'deterrent' when discussing this, referring to the material capabilities of NATO.

However, the Centre is the only party that mentions the security guarantees to perhaps be a hindrance to security as well. All the other parties who refer to Article 5 just focus on how other NATO members would come to the aid of Finland if needed. In comparison, the Centre party is the only party that mentions that Finland might also be forced to aid other countries. This is not to say that the Centre party is against attaining the security guarantees, but instead that they are considering the potential negative outcomes as well. In addition, the Centre party is the only party to talk about 'rational' weighing of options in matters of national security, which makes them appear very realist. Likewise, the Finns Party also mentions that they treat Russia in a 'realist' fashion. Not only do the parties attempt to evoke reason when discussing the security aspects of joining NATO but some of them also appeal in an emotive fashion. Instead of referring to the security of the state or the nation, there are instances where both the Social Democrats and the Centre Party explicitly employ the term 'Fatherland', and how the Fatherland's interest must come first. This can be considered as an expression of nationalism as well, which segues us into the discussion of unity.

When it comes to expressing unity, the five realist parties express more gradation than with the matter of security. The Social Democrats emphasise the need to have a Finnish view that is as uniform as possible. Chair and Prime Minister Sanna Marin refers many times to the consensus that has been attained over the spring between the deciding institutions and bodies, which is in line with the tradition of consensus in Finland. Thus, the Social Democrats can be seen to hold unity in very high regard. The party is keen to show that the opinion is shared, common, and mutual among the political establishment and thus deserving of utmost respect. In other words, they act as if the nation has an implicit need of unity to which the Social Democrats are willing to cater.

The Centre Party, in turn, does not speak of consensus, verbatim, but is consistent in highlighting how important it is to show national unity in the proceedings. They emphasise how instrumental it is in these volatile times, how important it is to cultivate it, and that the views of the party and nation are one and the same. They assert that the era of Finlandisation has now truly come to an end; Finland is free as a sovereign state and nation to decide for herself. For the Centre Party it also seems important to match itself as closely as possible with the Finnish population. For instance, they talk of how it is a principle for the Centre to put the needs of Finland first before the party. Like the Social Democrats, the Centre Party reveres parliamentary majority in the decision making as an extension of ensuring security and helps building it – an extension of consensus seeking.

Being a *de facto* nationalist party, the Finns Party seems to be an anomaly when it comes to presenting unity in nationalist terms. They are decorous and much less vocal than their colleagues in

the Social Democrats or the Centre, for instance. The Finns Party is content to state that their opinion represents that of the nation. They can be seen to almost underplay the situation which is explained in them being a populist party in opposition. The Finns Party is wary to commend the government about their actions and remain very matter-of-fact in their expressions of consensus. They state that the NATO question must not be reduced to day-to-day politicking, and thus they are doing the respectable thing of being on board, on the right side of history in almost a nonchalant fashion. Overall, the Finns Party respect the consensus inherent in FFSP but in a slightly antagonistic manner.

Conversely, even the Green League emphasise the importance of consensus for the process. However, this cannot be considered an expression of nationalism as they are more concerned with the practicalities of getting to the actual membership process. In other words, they do not express *national* unity, either consciously or unconsciously, but do expect it from others in order to show “a functioning democratic political system,” which the NATO 1995 Study on Enlargement requires aspiring members to do. Another reason why the Green League cannot be regarded as nationalist is that they do not appear to be engaging the electorate. Nowhere does the Green League speak of ‘Finns’ or ‘nation’. They only refer to the state of Finland. The party gives the impression that they do not care about the polls and instead that they have made the decision in isolation based on the party’s self-interest. This might be taken as a conscious decision not to be seen as pandering to the people, but the underlying cause is that nationalist arguments are not thought to go down well with the Green League in general, i.e., in those who the party elite is trying to exhort to support NATO.

Both the Left Alliance and the Green League need to show that the will of the people is the will of the party, but the difference resides in *whom* this display is aimed at. The Greens can be seen to be most concerned about how they, as a party with strong roots in the peace movement, could justify their support for a military alliance. Conversely, the Left seems to be most concerned about having to justify their about-turn to the public, being a party so strongly opposed to NATO in the past. The rationale, for them, is not based on security but unity.

The Left Alliance is the only party not explicitly tying their change of stance to security. They do acknowledge Russia’s actions as a catalyst why the discourse about joining NATO has increased nationwide, but are not, as a party, committed to accepting this kind of thinking in their political agenda. Even if the Left Alliance themselves are not sold on the idea of NATO maximising security, they accept that the vast majority of Finnish citizens and parties do support it. Thus, for them, the main selling point in their changed NATO stance is unity and even unitarity itself. The party goes on the record when stating that the Left Alliance might disagree with becoming a member of NATO, but they will not oppose it by leaving the government if it came to that. At least two reasons for this finding can be identified. The first is that the party has shifted its stance in favour of NATO, but because of its historical baggage there remains factions inside the party that continue to oppose NATO. Therefore, for the sake of keeping up appearances of unity, this particular group must be appeased. Since the conference and vote was held behind closed doors, we cannot know for certain. That being said, it is not farfetched to assume that there is some overlap with the six MPs who voted against NATO membership application in the parliament and the ten votes against in the conference.

The other somewhat more likely scenario is that due to the major shift in the security thinking in Finland, as the majority of the people as well as the other parliamentary parties were supporting applying for NATO membership, the Left Alliance had to submit to the changing times. The data support this scenario. The decision has already been made for them, and now it is just a question of how to retain and portray a shred of agency in their decision-making process. It is easier to oppose NATO when just a quarter of the population supports it, but when the *zeitgeist* changes, so must

the party's stance. The party does not effectively speak of submission rather than being able to go with the flow, so to speak. In sum, the Left Alliance's strategy can be seen as a delicate balancing act between being for and against NATO, with their use of nationalism playing a role in establishing the party's legitimacy towards the population. The people had made their stance, and now what was left for the Left Alliance was to follow suit. The party would do what is right and honourable for the sake of the nation and its people. In the end, the party might not be unitary in itself, but it is not willing to break the unity of the nation in this matter, adding to the consensus seeking in FFSP.

The Green League is most interested in expressing how their party identity remains intact even with supporting NATO. Where the Left Alliance is able to admit that they are capable of change in concordance with the times, the Green League is adamant in demonstrating that for them nothing has to change. This can be seen due to the roots of the party being in the peace movement and how joining a military alliance might possibly be seen as a disruption in seeking those objectives. Actually, the data shows that when it comes to the opening speeches, the party elite is trying to persuade the delegation to vote for becoming a member of NATO. For instance, the Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto urges the delegation to solemnly consider whether the time to implement the NATO option is now, and if not, then when would it be. The Green League in their rhetoric also appears to be talking amongst themselves, and not to the population. With their decision being unanimous, the only task left is for the party to justify the decision to themselves. As this justification is done solely in terms of security and not of national identity, the Green League is conveying a realist perspective, but are not nationalist in their policy position formation.

Conclusion

This article examined how Finnish parliamentary parties used a combination of realism and nationalism to ground, as well as justify, their change in stance regarding NATO membership. As the issue can be considered a manifestation of Gallup democracy where the majority of people were already found to be for NATO, the parties essentially had to explain the will of the people to the people themselves, at least insofar as to show that they understood what it is. The decision to join NATO is a realist one (maximising security), the elite conveyed the argument to join to the public through nationalism (to depoliticise the issue), and a past of constructivist identity seeking allowed Finland to find itself in the position to actually do so (having a Western identity). Finland had hitherto been more focused on how it appears outward and internationally, but now the emphasis was on looking inward and making decisions from a national interest, while conversely paying attention to appearances in showing that Finland is indeed unitary and its actions are deliberate and measured.

A clear majority of parties were found to frame their reasoning in terms of security as well as unity, offering arguments that employ both realist and nationalist strategies. Even the parties who did not use an explicit combination of security and unity in their argumentation were found to have at least one of the constituent elements present in their line of reasoning. Respecting the tradition of consensus in matters of FFSP, the majority of the parties emphasised the reverence towards unity, the case in point being the Left Alliance which did use security as grounds for their decision but justified it with national will. Being so resolutely against NATO membership in the past, they were less than thrilled to undergo this change of not opposing it anymore, but wanted to do this by showing willingness to respect how things stood. In other words, they had already made the decision but were now concerned with how to justify it to the outside world and did so by doubling down on the issue of consensus.

The Green League, however, was found to be more interested in playing down the contradiction

of joining a military alliance and having its roots in the peace movement. However, engagements with these arguments mostly occurred towards other party members and not the general populace. Pertaining to this, their argumentation was found to not contain any nationalist argumentation and for them the issue was solely about security. Paradoxically, the nationalistic Finns Party was found to actually de-emphasise their nationalistic argumentation in their stance formation. Being a populist party in the opposition, they were deemed to be cautious not to praise the government for any of their actions. They rather focused on pointing out that joining NATO is the right thing to do – for the nation and state – and that they will do their part. All in all, the nationalist party was not found to be any more nationalist than the other parties employing similar nationalist strategies. Conversely, it was actually the two main government parties of the Social Democrats and the Centre Party that can be characterised as the most nationalist in their stance formation. Both of them were found to underline the need for Finnish unity, in line with the tradition prevalent in Finnish foreign and security policy issues.

This study has shown how nationalism can be a contributing factor when it comes to states joining international organisations. The combination of realism and nationalism has proven itself to be a viable framework with which to examine the international system and more research is encouraged in both applying the framework to other cases and examining nationalism not just as a disruptor but also as a unifier in the realm of international relations.

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