
Peer-Reviewed Article

The United Nations and Nordic identity: reflections on Finnish UN policy in the 2000s

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Abstract

Support for the United Nations (UN) has been a strong priority for the Nordic states. The group has been cooperating to promote their shared values and interests since the 1960s. The Nordics have gained a reputation as do-gooders, norm advocates and strong supporters of the UN. This article studies Finland's UN policy in the 2000s from the perspective of Nordic identity, specifically how the Finnish approach reflects the common identity within the three pillars of the UN system. On the theoretical level the article is based on the literature covering group politics and collective identity. We focus on the value-based, expressive and instrumental dimensions of Nordic identity, drawing on Finnish foreign policy documentation and interviews with key Finnish UN diplomats and policymakers. According to the findings, Nordic identity is essential for Finnish UN policy, even if there is variation in time and in policy areas.

Keywords

Finland, Nordic identity, United Nations, norms, diplomacy

Introduction

The Helsinki Treaty of 1962 formalised cooperation among the Nordic states and the role of the inter-parliamentary Nordic Council, as established in 1952. The Nordic Council of Ministers was then founded in 1971 to improve cooperation among Nordic governments. The purpose of both formal and informal Nordic cooperation is to consult and share information, coordinate policies, and to promote common values and interests through speeches, statements and comments. The UN has been an influential forum for Nordic cooperation on different diplomatic levels at least since the 1960s. All five Nordic states belong to the regional Western European and Others Group (WEOG), and they have a system of rotation for membership in the UN bodies. Through cooperation and assuming common positions the Nordics have been able to punch above their weight, and to achieve visibility in questions such as gender equality, peacekeeping, mediation and sustainable development. Moreover, Nordic contributions to UN leadership and to the budget have been considerable (see Laatikainen, 2003, 410), demonstrating their commitment to the UN system.

The Nordic brand, which was deliberately constructed during the Cold War, was highly positive. Within the UN the Nordics advocated for a more peaceful advanced society, international morality and social justice, based on their own societal model (Browning 2007, 35). This image was maintained after the Cold War in characterisations of the Nordic states as exceptional actors (Brommesson, 2007; Wivel, 2017), ‘do-gooders’ (Puyvallée and Björkdahl, 2022) and advocates of ambitious norms (Ingebritsen, 2002; Björkdahl, 2007; Tuominen, 2022). This general picture may hide the more critical perceptions of the Nordics as an arrogant and self-righteous group (see Seppä and Tervo, 2020, 301) that sees itself as morally superior (Tuomioja, 2013). According to Jakobsen (2017), the Nordic-UN relationship became more instrumental after the end of the Cold War. The Nordics also became a more intrinsic part of the EU bloc and the wider West, which diminished their distinct profile (Laatikainen, 2003; Browning, 2007). Nordic cooperation has intensified more recently, especially in foreign, security and defence issues due to changes in the European and regional security environment. Overall, Nordic views have converged (Brommesson et al., 2023), enabling the adoption of a more cohesive perspective. The number of common Nordic statements has increased at the UN, and cooperation with the Baltic states in the NB8 format has been lively. This activation of the Nordic group is not surprising in the currently contested multilateral system. The regional, long-standing collaboration provides a firm basis for action in times of crisis (Brommesson et al., 2023), and a unique reference group for Finland.

However, the collective Nordic brand may well conceal relevant differences among the Nordics at the UN - in resources, political commitments and domestic factors driving UN policy, for example (see Götz, 2011). When the Cold War ended the Nordic countries, at different speeds, departed from their humane internationalist tradition by developing more militarised activism (Wivel, 2017; Pedersen, 2018). On the international level these states also compete for influence and status. They each have their own UN priorities and a willingness to promote national visibility (Haugevik and Sending 2020, 111). Hence, there is a need to differentiate and build individual profiles to complement the common Nordic image. In any case, according to Rören (2019), competition among the Nordics is friendly, and strong societal linkages enable collective and constrain individual status-seeking.

The positive Nordic reference group has been valuable for Finland, and leaning to Nordicness has been a long-term preferred choice. However, there is also variety in the degree to which Nordicness matters (Ojanen and Raunio, 2018, 415). Our focus in this article is on the UN, which is an interesting traditional forum for close Nordic cooperation. More particularly, we study Finland’s UN policy

in the 2000s from the perspective of Nordic identity, and consider how the Finnish UN approach reflects the common identity within the three pillars of the UN system. Overall, there has not been as much academic research on Finnish UN policy compared to the other Nordics. Previous policy-oriented papers have concentrated on Finland's general approach at the UN (Vesa, 2012; Gowan, 2015). Academic contributions include studies on Finnish UN campaigns (Seppä and Tervo, 2020; Tuominen, 2022) and activities concerning specific policies or issues (Karhu and Lanki, 2022; Tuominen, 2023b). The aim in this article is to shed light on why and how this group matters among its individual members, and thereby to enhance current knowledge about the Nordic group at the UN (Ingebritsen, 2002; Laatikainen, 2003; Götz, 2011; Jakobsen, 2017; Rören, 2019; Creutz, 2021).

According to the tenets of constructivism, identities play an essential role in enhancing understanding of the foreign-policy behaviour and interests of states. We interpret Nordic identity as a form of collective affinity, reflecting a sense of belonging to a group. Collective identities are more fluid, tentative and evolving than national or personal identities. They are constructed, modified and sustained in interactive processes whereby the group acknowledges the commonalities. Thus, Nordic identity is based on shared values, normative beliefs and common interests. We are interested in manifestations of this identity through cooperative practices and common statements. According to Andersson (2010, 49), cooperation based on a collective identity is considered self-evident and an end in itself. However, such identities may also serve more interest-based ends, used as means to achieve other purposes. Our aim in this article is to trace all these dimensions of the collective Nordic identity, from the value-based to the expressive and instrumental.

As our documentary data we use Finnish government programmes, foreign-policy documents and various strategies focusing on UN-relevant policies, as well as detailed data concerning Finnish UN priorities, statements and reports from the 2000s. The documents are complemented with insights from key Finnish UN policy makers and civil servants collected via semi-structured interviews (N=15). We interviewed the then President of Finland, Tarja Halonen (2000-2012), permanent representatives of Finland to the UN, directors of UN-policy-related departments of the Foreign Ministry, as well as other experts who have worked closely with UN issues. The appendices give a complete list of the documents and interviews. Many reports on Finnish UN policy remain confidential and secret for 25 years. Hence, our unique interview data enhances understanding of the country's policy in the 2000s by revealing subjective experiences and perceptions of the Nordic dimension as well as often undocumented diplomatic practices within the group.

Following this introduction our article is divided into four parts. First we outline the relevance of group politics at the UN and discuss the Nordics as a group. The focus in the second part is on Nordic collective identity and its three dimensions. In the third part we present our methodological choices and the research data, and in the fourth part we analyse Nordic identity in Finnish UN policy, reflecting on this more generally at first, and then through the three pillars of the UN system, namely peace and security, human rights, and development. Finally, we draw some conclusions about its relevance in Finland's UN policy.

The Nordic group in the UN

The analysis of UN politics requires an understanding of group politics because different regional, political and thematic group memberships do matter. The UN has five official regional and electoral groups: the African Group, the Asia-Pacific Group, the Eastern European Group, the Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC) and the Western European and Other Group (WEOG). Such grouping ensures an equal geographical balance in UN bodies and leadership positions. Political groups are

highly important for member states as they are major repositories of identity and ideas (Smith and Laatikainen, 2020, 3). They may be long-standing groupings such as the Group of 77 (representing developing countries) or the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), representing Muslim countries and founded in the 1960s, or they may be temporary, even ad hoc coalitions focused on single issues.

Bloc behaviour such as voting consistently as a unit has increasingly created tensions at the UN. In particular, tensions between China, Russia and the United States and their need to find allies who align with their positions have influenced UN decision-making. Given the resulting confrontations, blocs have rather negative connotations. The EU as a regional organisation forms an effective and visible group in the UN, even if it does not have an official status in many of its bodies. EU member states are obliged to act in unison when there is a common position, and otherwise to support each other's positions (Laatikainen, 2017; Tuominen, 2023b).

Acting in groups matters especially to smaller states, potentially giving them more influence and visibility, and better access to information. The Nordic group is categorised as a regional political group, which shares collective interests in UN deliberations (Laatikainen, 2017, 116), with a reputation for unusual unity and dedicated support for the rule-based international order (Laatikainen, 2003, 414). It is de facto recognisable externally as the Nordic states rotate for membership of UN bodies and join their forces through common statements and consistent voting. They often meet key UN and third-state leaders together, and cooperate in the GA high-level week and in organising events. The collective action of the Nordic states is based on consensus, and in cases of disagreement they are free to act individually. This provides highly valued flexibility and pragmatism (Iso-Markku et al., 2018, 9). Overall, Nordic cooperation happens on all political levels, based to a significant extent on typical features including informal networking, experience sharing and joint action (Strang, 2016). On UN issues the Nordic states have long traditions of cooperation on all diplomatic levels among national ministries and in UN delegations.

A curious feature of the Nordic group is that Finland, Denmark and Sweden are bound by common EU positions, whereas Iceland and Norway are not. Intensive EU cooperation diminished the autonomy and recognition of the group at the UN in the 1990s (Laatikainen, 2003; Browning, 2007; Wivel, 2017). However, it has also been claimed that Nordic priorities such as gender equality were extended to the European level (Elgström, 2017). According to Jakobsen (2017, 290), the Nordic-UN relationship has become more instrumental since the end of the Cold War, and the UN is perceived as one instrument among others. In fact, Nordic member states have been eager to promote more effective EU action in the UN. Challenges in EU cooperation and a wider multilateral system have recently provided an impetus for more intensive Nordic cooperation (Brommesson et al., 2023). In particular, the Nordics are willing to take more ambitious positions on issues such as gender equality and LGBTI rights, whereas the EU may not always manage to act in unity, or it takes only lowest-common-denominator positions (Tuominen, 2023a).

Hence, the relevance of the Nordic group seems to depend on various external and internal factors. Domestic political forces and changes in governments explain policy formation and orientation to the UN (Karhu and Lanki, 2022). The restrictions in the migration policies of the Nordic states is one example of a change that has eroded their brand at the UN. However, changes in the structural environment and external events often have even more influence on the policies of smaller states (Brommesson et al., 2023). Russia's aggression has changed the entire security environment and led to the prioritisation of NATO relations. Thus, other institutional commitments affect policies and decision-making in the Nordics. Finally, relations with third states, and especially bilateral relations

with the US, have had an effect on adopted UN policies, as is evident in UN crisis-management operations (see Wivel, 2017; Pedersen, 2018).

Nordic identity in the UN

There are many underlying reasons behind Nordic UN cooperation, but in this article we underline the relevance of identity-based explanations. In line with the constructivist view (see Browning, 2007; 2008), we believe that questions of identity are essential in understanding Finnish UN policy. Nordic identity represents a regional collective identity, whereby the self is conceptualised in a collective way. It leans on mutual trust and a long, joint political history and societal development. The shared values, common perceptions of norms and principles and regionally shared security concerns explain the congruence of Nordic UN orientations. The shared general approach and values make the Nordic collective identity a natural and even self-sustaining phenomenon, strengthened by the fact that many Nordic institutions and cooperation channels and practices support it.

Identities are constructed and reconstructed in interaction with different audiences, especially by differentiating from others. Many collective identities are based on the idea that one's own group is somehow better than others. Nordic exceptionalism was seen as a key ingredient of Nordic identity during the Cold War, and the 'peace-loving and rational Nordics' differentiated themselves from conflict-prone Europe (Browning, 2007, 27). The Nordic model was portrayed as superior, better than the alternatives and based on a low level of tension and social welfare (Waever, 1992; Wivel, 2017, 491). Nordic identity faced a crisis as the Cold War ended and its exceptionalism eroded. A strengthening EU identity also diminished its importance: it was not distinct enough from that of the rest of Europe. This demonstrates how the vitality of identities relates to a specific timeframe, and Nordic identity did not seem to be the most relevant. Thus, situational relevance explains the activation of collective identities (Andersson, 2010, 48). Hence, collective identities vary over time, but also among policy areas.

Finland has at least three co-existing identity narratives in the UN. *Nordic identity* was an essential link to Western identification after 1945, and differentiated Finland from Eastern Europe and the Baltic republics (Browning, 2008, 195). The end of the Cold War rendered Finland's policy of neutrality unnecessary: the country joined the EU in 1995 and *European identity* gained ground. However, the intention was to bring good Nordic values such as a strong environmental policy, development and equality into the EU (Elgström, 2017). Interestingly, Nordic cooperation was often presented as an alternative to European integration in the 1990s, and Waever (1992) predicted that there would be a wider *Nordic-Baltic identity*. Apart from situational relevance, commitment is an essential factor activating collective identities: it reveals the fact that not all identities are of equal importance to an actor (Andersson, 2010, 49).

Our initial focus in this article is on Finnish UN politics, and we consider both the commitment and the timely variation of the Nordic dimension. We trace Nordic identity by considering the value-based shared *thematic priorities* of the countries concerned. Second, we are interested in the manifestations of a common Nordic identity, namely practices of diplomatic cooperation, consistent voting and common statements indicating the *expressive side of identity*. Third, we turn to the more *instrumental dimension*, acknowledging the ways in which a common identity may be used for reaching other goals, mainly through developing differentiating niche areas using the Nordic brand. As Andersson (2010) notes, such means-oriented action could also strengthen collective identities, and hence should not be bypassed in the analysis.

Data and methods

Our documentary data consists of Finland's Government programmes, UN strategies, other relevant UN policy documents (on foreign and security policy, human rights and development policy), thematic UN-related documents, Finnish priorities at the UN General Assembly and reports by UN ambassadors. During the period under examination, Finland published UN strategies in 2001, 2008 and 2013, and a white paper on multilateralism in 2021 providing the main framework for action. Because many of the relevant UN documents are confidential, we traced Finland's UN and Nordic dimension policy through semi-structured expert interviews (n=15) conducted in the spring/summer of 2023. The informants included a former President of Finland, Finnish UN ambassadors, directors of UN-relevant units at the Foreign Ministry, thematic ambassadors and thematic experts. Because of our assurance of anonymity we refer to the interviews only by date. A complete list of the documents used and the interviewees is to be found in the appendices. The interview data complements current understanding of Finnish UN policy in the 2000s in revealing subjective experiences and perceptions of the Nordic dimension, as well as the frequently un-recorded diplomatic activities within the group. The interviewees had the opportunity to comment on the final version of this article.

The interview data covers themes such as shared values, cooperation practices and differences among the Nordics. It was used to operationalise value-based, expressive and instrumental dimensions of Nordic identity in Finnish UN policy. Cooperation is a necessary indication of a collective identity and the perceptions and motives behind it. Much of the diplomatic cooperation among the Nordics is informal and based on unwritten practices, which makes the interview material highly relevant for studying the Nordic dimension. The interviews were adjusted to the expertise of the interviewees and the relevant time period, and the informants were free to add their own remarks on relevant issues. We analysed the documentary and interview data using thematic coding drawn from our theoretical framework on Nordic identity. We report our findings by focusing, first, on the general Nordic orientation and then on how Nordic identity is reflected in different UN pillars such as peace and security, human rights and development. The results shed light on Finland's commitment to its Nordic identity, how it varies and how interviewees express it. Special attention is paid to the varying views reflected in the official documents and in our interview data, as well as between informants and policy areas.

Finnish UN policy and the Nordic dimension

The Finnish UN policy line is decided in Helsinki, and UN delegations follow individual issues and the positions of other states. According to our interviewees, cooperation among the Nordics takes various forms and happens among capitals, delegations and individuals. Government programmes, UN priorities and UN strategies are decided by the political leadership assisted by civil servants in different ministries. Many interviewees emphasised the role of experts in formulating and leading Finnish UN policy, and the lack of a more public UN debate. This seemed to differentiate Finland from the other Nordics, in which Parliaments and civil societies are more actively involved, for example.¹ The UN unit in the Foreign Ministry is responsible for coordination, but other departments and delegations play roles in formulating policy.² Furthermore, other ministries are actively involved

1. Interviews 9.5.b; 19.6.

2. In the Political Department, for example, the Unit for Human Rights Policy and Peace Mediation, in the Department of Development Policy the Unit for UN Development Issues and in the Legal Services the Unit for Public International Law.

in thematic UN issues.³ The increased need for cooperation between the ministries on multilateral issues is recognised (MFA 2021a, 14). The role of the Foreign Ministry has been emphasised lately due to the politicisation of many UN issues and forums. Finland is reorganising its UN policy leadership to improve coordination and effectiveness – and the best model is being sought from the other Nordics.⁴

Analysis of the key Finnish documents showed that UN policy and priorities did not change dramatically in the 2000s. The interviewees confirmed the long-term stability and coherence of Finland's UN policy and its presence within the key pillars.⁵ As one of them remarked, the Finnish UN profile was very natural, self-evident and well-known among others.⁶ These were considered strengths; Finland has emphasised the close connection between UN pillars and bodies. Together with the other Nordics, the country has aimed to strengthen multilateral cooperation and the UN system, and has defended the integrity and independence of the Secretary General and other UN position holders (MFA 2021a). Finland was active in the early 2000s when Harri Holkeri served as the first Finnish President of the UNGA. President Tarja Halonen together with President of Namibia Sam Nujoma acted as joint Presidents of the UN Millennium Summit, and Ambassador Marjatta Rasi chaired the ECOSOC (Final Report by Rasi, 2005). Finland, together with the other Nordics, has actively supported the UN reforms agreed at the World Summit of 2005, and facilitated the participation of civil society and private actors in UN policymaking (Finnish Government, 2021, 37-38). Enhancing the participation of civil society is a shared objective among the Nordics. More recently, Finnish UN priorities have stressed the defence of the multilateral rule-based system and its norms, the fight against disinformation and fake news, as well as resisting authoritarianism – an agenda that is also shared among the Nordics.⁷

Paradigmatically, Finnish UN policy has changed from a more institutional to a thematic approach. In the view of some interviewees this was the key reason why the UN strategy had not been updated: UN policy is considered part of the wider foreign and security policy.⁸ However, it was also recognised that there had been some lack of interest in UN affairs at the end of the 2010s, which was also related to resources and priorities in the Foreign Ministry.⁹ Many long-term Finnish UN priorities reflect shared Nordic values: these include commitments to prevent conflicts and strengthen peace meditation, and to support and advance human rights, focusing particularly on gender equality and supporting the rights of women and girls as well as of the most vulnerable groups. Other shared priorities include supporting the implementation of UN climate change action and Agenda 2030. Finland's UN policy has a cross-cutting focus on gender equality and inclusivity (MFA, 2013), both predominant Nordic values. Finland also seeks niche policy areas to differentiate itself from others, including its Nordic neighbours.¹⁰ Themes mentioned included new technologies, water diplomacy, sanitation issues, and resolutions on youth, peace and security. However, allocating resources to specific themes when they were lacking in core areas was criticised.¹¹ Several interviewees mentioned how Sweden and Norway were promoting a wider UN agenda, whereas Denmark was highly prioritising its efforts.

3. Interviews 3.5; 16.5.a.

4. Interviews 3.5.; 9.5.a; 16.5.a.

5. Interviews 3.5.; 9.5.a; 16.5.a; 19.6.; 28.6.; 22.8.

6. Interview 16.5.a.

7. Interview 28.4.; 3.5.; 2.6.; 23.8.

8. Interviews 3.5.; 9.5.a; 9.5.b; 19.6.

9. Interviews 9.5.a.; 28.6.

10. Interview 9.5.a; 28.6.

11. Interview 13.6.

Finland sought membership in the principal UN organs by following the Nordic rotation system. Many interviewees referred to the Nordic dimension as being most evident in the negotiations on coordinating memberships. Finland was a member of the Human Rights Council in 2006, and returned for the ongoing term 2022-24. It served as a member of the Security Council in 1969-70 and 1989-90 but lost its latest campaign in 2012. The reasons behind the defeat have been related to the Nordic image in literature, and many interviewees confirmed that the need arose after the campaign to reconsider the pros and cons of the Nordic reference group. Finland will seek SC membership for the term 2029-30 with Nordic support after a potential Danish term. According to the interviewees, UN campaigns and memberships have key relevance in the development of Finnish policy.¹² As these efforts attract extra resources, they provide opportunities to reconsider UN policy, strategy and wider, non-European bilateral partnerships. This is also expressed in the new Government programme, which promises to update UN strategy to create space for the upcoming SC campaign (Finnish Government, 2023b, 163).

The EU is the key political group for Finland at the UN, and it aims to act coherently and to coordinate positions in UN forums (Tuominen, 2023a). Wider EU guidelines for common action are coordinated by the United Nations Working Party (CONUN) in the Council.¹³ Finland has consistently argued in its policy documents in favour of a stronger global role for the EU (see MFA 2021a). Coherence and effectiveness within the UN have been seen as crucial, as has as the promotion of EU-UN cooperation. According to reports, Finnish Council presidencies (1999, 2006, 2019) were major opportunities for increasing Finland's visibility and showing leadership. Running the presidency in multilateral forums was an enormous undertaking for a small state, especially before the Lisbon treaty. Simultaneously, these events shaped and improved the Finnish UN approach and the country's status.¹⁴ Many interviewees mentioned how other international responsibilities and chairmanships had also strengthened Finland's UN profile (see also Tuominen, 2022).

According to the Government (2021, 38), Nordic UN cooperation promotes common values and objectives. Informality and mutual trust were mentioned as key strengths of the group.¹⁵ The willingness and need for more intensive cooperation is apparent, with more references to the Nordic dimension in documents. One interviewee said that Finland had consciously stressed the EU dimension as it gave it more leverage. However, Nordicness is underlined because of the shared values.¹⁶ Interestingly, it was mentioned that Nordic cooperation was even prioritised over the EU in some diplomatic practices.¹⁷ Remarks such as these underline the deep commitment to Nordic identity. Many interviewees emphasised the beneficial, positive image of the Nordics¹⁸, although some contested this purely positive image in acknowledging Nordic self-righteousness on a broader scale.¹⁹ Overall, the relevance of the Nordic group was underlined in relation to collective representation and elections, and also to shared themes and values. However, it was also suggested that the Nordics wished to avoid being seen as too united as a bloc, and instead aimed to build bridges beyond like-minded states. This tendency was considered strongest in the Finnish and

12. Interviews 9.5.a; 12.6.a.; 13.6.; 28.6.; 23.8.

13. Interview 9.5.a.

14. Interviews 16.5.b; 12.6.a; 19.6.

15. Interviews 3.5.; 9.5.b; 16.5.b; 13.6.

16. Interview 19.6.

17. Interviews 23.8.

18. Interviews 16.5.a; 16.5.b; 12.6.b; 13.6.; 22.8.; 23.8.

19. Interviews 9.5.a; 28.6.

Norwegian approaches.²⁰

There has been a long-term tendency to improve the effectiveness of cooperation among Nordic and Baltic states (MFA, 2008, 17). Such efforts are evident in the increasing number of common Nordic-Baltic (NB8) statements delivered in UN forums, especially in Geneva. However, according to the interviewees, cooperation such as this is pragmatic and based on interests - it is activated when beneficial and there is variation between forums and pillars.²¹ Hence, the Nordic-Baltic identity exists, but it tends to be more superficial and interest-based. Furthermore, documents and interviewees referred to the role of the UN as more of a forum through which to build up bilateral relationships with countries Finland did not otherwise reach.²² Several interviewees mentioned the thematic UN Group of Friends through which Finland had successfully cooperated with non-European countries. As many of them pointed out, without these groups it would be impossible to achieve any results.²³

Nordic identity in peace and security

The Nordic Council has recently been promoting the Nordic peace brand, which according to Hagemann and Bramsen (2019) consists of two elements: core values and ways of working. Historically, the Nordics have had an active role in UN peace-keeping operations (MFA, 2013). During the Cold War, for example, almost a quarter of the peace-keeping troops came from the Nordic states. However, although participation has decreased over the years due to a lack of capabilities and changes in peace-keeping operations, there is still a false image of Finland as a great power in this respect.²⁴ The Finnish focus has gradually evolved towards overall conflict prevention and peace mediation. The NGO's and individuals played a central role in building up Finland's reputation for mediation in the UN. Martti Ahtisaari founded the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) in the early 2000s after his term as the country's President, and he served in several important UN positions of trust. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008, the first Finn to be thus honoured. According to our interviewees, this motivated the prioritisation of mediation.²⁵ Changes in the other Nordic countries, such as the diminishing Swedish global orientation and role after the 2006 elections, also helped to promote and develop a stronger Finnish profile in issues of peace and security.²⁶

The 2011 Government Programme and Action Plan on Mediation mentioned peace-building and mediation as the key foreign-policy priorities. Finland had been supporting political UN missions, together with Mexico, since 2012, initiating the UN Group of Friends of Mediation with Turkey in 2010 and the following UNGA resolutions (2011, 2012, 2014, 2016) on peace mediation. Other strong priorities in the early 2010s included support for the International Criminal Court and rule-of-law development, as well as backing the Responsibility to Protect (MFA, 2013). However, in the end the Finnish contribution to R2P has been rather moderate compared to that of its Nordic neighbours, especially Denmark (Tuominen, 2023b). Finland continues to promote the rule of law as vital for sustainable peace-building (MFA, 2011b), a notable part of which is to fight against the culture of impunity for serious crimes. The Nordics and the Baltics have been vocal in addressing Russian violations of international law at the UN, demanding justice for Ukrainian victims.

20. Interview 28.4.; 16.5.a; 28.6.

21. Interviews 9.5.a; 9.5.b.; 16.5.a; 2.6.; 28.6.; 22.8.

22. Interviews 16.5.a; 19.6.; 28.6.

23. Interviews 16.5.a; 2.6.; 12.6.b; 28.6.

24. Interviews 9.5.b; 16.5.a; 12.6.b.

25. Interviews 12.6.a; 22.8.

26. Interviews 12.6.a; 28.6.

Arms control and disarmament were also mentioned as areas in which Finland has contributed much and gained expertise²⁷, placing particular emphasis on preventing the proliferation and illicit trade of small arms and light weapons (MFA, 2011b). The country was one of the founding members of the Arms Trade Treaty Resolution core group in 2006, and Ambassador Klaus Korhonen acted as President of the working group in 2016-2017. The Nordics have expressed their common views through statements in various UN forums. However, according to one interviewee, the Finnish profile is distinct, Finns not always voted consistently with the Nordics and some EU countries.²⁸ Nevertheless, all the Nordics have actively contributed to and promoted the disarmament agenda at the UN, making it a common cause. They have also strived to increase the participation of women in disarmament fora.

Overall, peace and security were defined as highly competitive fields among the Nordics, despite their common values and expressions within this pillar. The profiles are remarkably similar in their support for UNSC agenda 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS). Women's empowerment is visible in different initiatives, such as the Nordic Women Mediator network established in 2015. Finland has focused on the operational side of the WPS, emphasising the agency of women and climate issues, whereas Iceland has concentrated on the role of men and boys.²⁹ Finland has aimed to enhance the role of young people in the different stages of peace processes (MFA, 2021a, MFA, 2021c, UNGA priorities, 2018), and it was the first country to prepare a national action plan on youth, peace and security resolution in 2021. Supporting the participation of religious and traditional leaders in peace processes is also underlined when state institutions are weak (MFA, 2021, MFA, 2013, 19). Finland contributed to the Peace Building Fund in the 2000s (MFA, 2021c), but its support is moderate in comparison to that of Norway and Sweden. Finland, although not currently participating in the Peace Building Commission is aiming for a more active role (UNGA priorities, 2020).

The EU is the main framework for action, and the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has shaped Finland's UN policy. Key priorities are set in EU coordination meetings, and following the 2009 Lisbon Treaty EU members of the SC have been compelled to foster EU interests and to act in cooperation. Finland has been active in strengthening EU crisis-management capabilities and political operations together with Sweden, and has contributed especially to the training and education of personnel (MFA 2011b). More recently, Finland has also educated other Nordic diplomats in the peaceful resolution of cyber disputes (MFA 2021a, 21). Otherwise, the Nordic aspect in the EU has been less evident given that Denmark had an opt-out from the CFSP until 2022. Finland has been able to promote the EU agenda in the UN during its Council presidencies, participating in SC meetings and delivering EU statements in 2006³⁰, and updating the EU's peace mediation concept in 2019 (MFA, 2021c, 11). However, according to our interviewees, the Nordic brand as a positive force for international peace and security is still strong and serves as a major platform of influence.³¹ Within the SC the Nordic states express their views mainly through common statements, and each Nordic candidacy is supported by the group.³²

The wider Nordic-Baltic (NB8) identity has not been so prominent on matters of peace and security. There have been no joint NB8 statements in the SC, apart from some related to Ukraine. This was

27. Interviews 9.5.a; 12.6.a.

28. Interview 9.5.b.

29. Interviews 9.5.a; 28.6.

30. Interview 16.5.b.

31. Interviews 9.5.; 12.6.b.

32. Interview 23.8.

attributed to the less prominent positions and contributions of the Baltics at the UN, the divergent approaches to security issues, and the traditional deep commitment to the Nordic group.³³ However, there is informal cooperation, including Arria-Formula meetings such as ‘Media Freedom in Belarus’ (22 January 2021), in which Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined with other WEOG countries. Finland has also organised yearly preparation seminars for upcoming SC members (MFA, 2008), which demonstrates overall support for the UN system.

Human rights and the Nordic orientation

The human-rights unit in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs was founded in 1996, following the model set by other EU states. Finland did not express its opinions of country-specific violations during the Cold War, which differed from the Swedish position. Many interviewees mentioned that the legal, almost technical dimension was still very much alive in the Finnish approach. However, the EU membership increased the pressure also to take political positions.³⁴ The Government published communiqués or reports on human-rights policy in 1998, 2000, 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2021. It was considered important to emphasise coherence between domestic and external human rights, especially in the early 2000s. The Foreign Ministry published a strategy outlining the means of promoting external human rights in 2013, in line with the EU model³⁵. Later on the practice of combining the national, the EU and the global level in reporting continued, forming a unique model in international comparisons.³⁶ Overall, Finland’s foreign, security and development policies are human-rights based, which means that the impact on human rights of all actions are assessed (Government of Finland, 2020, 10).

Finland and the other Nordics support and promote the opportunities taken by the UN to address human rights through its procedures and monitoring bodies.³⁷ Finland has proposed several resolutions on safeguarding the independence and operational preconditions of treaty-monitoring bodies and HRC special procedures (Government of Finland, 2014, 17), and the Nordic countries have pledged their political support of the activities of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions through a resolution in the UNGA (Government of Finland, 2022, 27). Finland and Sweden presented the resolution on executions at the HRC in June 2023.³⁸ Currently, the most important task is to defend existing human-rights language in the face of contestation.³⁹

Finland works as part of the EU and coordinates human-rights positions within the group. However, the EU has not always been able to formulate ambitious positions on some key priorities, such as the promotion of women’s and girls’ sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the rights of indigenous peoples and sexual and gender minorities. Therefore, the cooperation has been lively among the Nordics, also including the Baltics.⁴⁰ The human-rights documents emphasise shared Nordic values and priorities, and these were also confirmed by the informants. Many interviewees named gender equality as the main Nordic success story, and an area in which all the states are highly active. Within this competitive field Finland specifically emphasises women’s political and economic participation, the elimination of discrimination against women, and SRHR (MFA, 2013, 21-

33. Interview 9.5.a.

34. Interviews 28.4; 16.5.b; 19.6.

35. The EU published its first Human Rights Strategy and action plan in 2012.

36. Interview 19.6.

37. Interviews 28.4.; 19.6.

38. Interview 19.6.

39. Interviews 28.4.; 12.6.b; 28.6.

40. Interviews 28.4.; 3.5.; 12.6.b.

24), and has contributed to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), serving as a member in 2013-16. Finnish delegations to the CSW are large, and the country was also active in 2023 as part of the EU negotiation team with Sweden, the Netherlands and Hungary.

Nordic cooperation has foregrounded equality, openness and non-discrimination, and the rights of the most vulnerable groups. In particular, the disability provision was highly visible in the Finnish UN profile in several areas, namely technology, education, water and sanitation, SRHR and conflicts.⁴¹ Finland funds projects that promote the rights of persons with disabilities, being one of the main funders of the UN Partnership to Promote the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNPRPD). Another major human-rights priority, shared with Sweden, concerns the rights and inclusion of indigenous peoples in UN decision-making. In 2017 Ambassador Kai Sauer acted as negotiator in consultations on how to facilitate the participation of indigenous people in the UN. Even if the negotiations did not proceed at that point, this was considered one of Finland's successes.⁴² Openness to participation of civil society is specific to the Nordics, who have made remarkable contributions to this goal at the UN. A major and increasingly common theme in the Nordics concerns human rights defenders (HRDs): Finland recently updated its guidelines to meet the increased challenges they face (MFA, 2023).

The Nordics and the Baltics have been issuing an increasing number of joint statements since 2017, which reflects their shared values and interests. One of the challenges is the extending UN mandate and workload.⁴³ Hence, the motivation lies in the potential to pool resources, rationalise UN work and take part in most of the ongoing discussions. However, the Nordics do not wish to appear as an exclusive group, hence they do not jointly sponsor resolutions but rather seek partners from other regions.⁴⁴ Widening the focus to include economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) is a major target, and Finland has promoted the right to education, adequate housing, food and water; the right to enjoy the highest standard of physical and mental health; and the right to work and enjoy equitable and favourable working conditions. Education and new technologies were among the key Finnish priorities in the HRC campaign aiming to update its status (Tuominen, 2022). Finland defended the right of all women and girls to a safe online environment during its chairing of the Freedom Online Coalition and in the Generation Equality campaign (Government of Finland, 2022, 90). Technology and innovation as the means of enhancing equality have been promoted through different UN events.⁴⁵

Nordic identity in development

Development policy is guided by national legislation and the Finnish constitution, in addition to international law and Finland's international commitments. UN Sustainable Development goals also play a part (MFA, 2021d, 9). Finland has implemented six development-policy programmes in the 2000s (2001, 2004, 2007, 2012, 2016 and 2021). The priorities in the latest one include women's and girls' rights, education, sustainable economies and decent work, peaceful and democratic societies as well as climate change and biodiversity. The goals have remained largely the same, although the original emphasis on poverty reduction has weakened.⁴⁶ Policies have been human-rights based

41. Interviews 28.4.; 16.5.a; 19.6.; 23.8.

42. Interview 28.4.

43. Interviews 28.4.; 12.6.b.

44. Interviews 28.4.; 12.6.b; 19.6.

45. Interview 28.6.

46. Interview 8.6.

since 2012, with particular attention paid to the most vulnerable groups. Finland's development policy is also focused on peace and security and the prevention of conflicts, reflecting the linkages among the UN pillars.

The documents we analysed showed how development has increasingly related to wider foreign- and security-policy issues since the 2000s. The interviewees explained this with reference to political as well as conceptual changes, including SDG enactment.⁴⁷ Finland served as a member of the ECOSOC in 2002-2004, with Ambassador Marjatta Rasi as its chair. Later, participation depended on the year and the themes.⁴⁸ Nordic+ cooperation used to be an influential framework (MFA, 2013, 94), but its relevance has decreased. According to the latest policy report (MFA, 2021d, 4), the Nordics are considered the closest reference group, even prioritised over the EU. Many interviewees referred to NB8 cooperation as still a work in progress, mainly due to their different and less visible roles as contributors. The war in Ukraine has also sharpened Baltic perspectives. However, cooperation with the Nordics is not self-evident given their wish also to maintain close relations with partners in the Global South instead of focusing only on Ukraine.⁴⁹

Finland and the Nordic states share common interests and priorities in development policy. According to one interviewee, the Nordic group has been remarkably united concerning values, goals and working methods.⁵⁰ Promoting gender equality and non-discrimination are essential common goals. Under Finland's policy of 2021, 76 per cent of all new development cooperation interventions, including core support for multilateral organisations, should advance gender equality (Vastapuu and Lyytikäinen, 2022, 13). The interviewees generally emphasised the Nordic initiative and contributions to UN Women⁵¹, in which Finland and its Nordic neighbours have invested heavily: overall, Finland has been its largest donor. The country's position was evident, for example, when the new Executive Director made her first overseas visit to Finland in 2021.⁵² Finland has also been active in the Generation Equality campaign, launched by UN Women.

The Nordics have historically cooperated on UN development issues, one example being the Nordic Development Fund. They also frequently express their common opinions in UN development debates, making them a highly unified group in the eyes of others.⁵³ The cooperation reflects the enhanced weight of development in the UN agenda since the 2000s, and the specific Nordic aid profile. Their contribution to the UN development budget is considerable (around 15%), making the group a strong reference for Finland.⁵⁴ According to Karhu and Lanki (2022), Finland has aimed to maintain a 'Nordic aid identity' because it is instrumentally beneficial. There are notable differences in aid volumes and targets, attributed in the literature mainly to domestic factors (Kjær et al., 2022, 323). Finland is clearly a smaller contributor than Sweden or Norway to development issues, however, and even if there is Nordic rotation, many of the board positions are dependent on granted funding.⁵⁵ As some interviewees pointed out, Finland benefits from the Nordic rotation of board memberships, but it should cooperate even more to get other candidates elected.⁵⁶ Overall, the Nordics as aid

47. Interviews 16.5.b; 2.6.; 13.6.

48. Interview 2.6.

49. Interviews 16.5, 2.6.; 23.8.

50. Interview 2.6.

51. Interviews 2.6.; 8.6.; 13.6.; 28.6.

52. Interviews 2.6.; 28.6.

53. Interview 23.8.

54. Interviews 16.5a; 2.6.

55. Interview 22.8.; 23.8.

56. Interviews 2.6.; 23.8.

donors were more united in the 1990s than in 2022, and instrumental considerations have become more visible in their approaches.

All Finnish governments in the 2000s have agreed to the UN target of spending 0.7 per cent of GNI on aid, but this has not materialised. As one interviewee recalled, development aid is highly dependent on electoral changes.⁵⁷ This was particularly apparent in the Government programme of Juha Sipilä (2015), which radically cut the aid budget and led to the prioritisation in their funding of UN organisations related to equality and women's rights.⁵⁸ As previous research has shown, these cuts were legitimised with reference to new trends in the Nordic countries (Ojanen and Raunio, 2018, 414). Hence, Nordic identity may also be instrumental in this respect. The report on development policy (MFA, 2021d) extended the planning beyond election terms and defined development as the core of foreign and security policy, expressing links between the UN pillars. However, in 2023 the newly formed government again decided to make substantial cuts to aid, and some interviewees raised concerns about the potential changes.⁵⁹ Similarly, reductions in Swedish development aid have called into question the future level of Nordic contributions.⁶⁰

In comparison to its Nordic neighbours, Finland gives the largest amount of its aid as core aid through UN organisations, namely UNFPA, UNDP, UNICEF and UN Women. Together with the other Nordics, it is one of the largest core funders of UNFPA, enabling long-term planning, flexible responses to emerging priorities, and sustainable support for human-rights-based programmes that help to improve the lives of women and young people in developing countries. In addition, Finland supports the UNFPA Innovation Fund and humanitarian efforts as well as specific projects and initiatives. Key interest areas include improving basic health and social services, including SRHR, and the prevention of maternal mortality and female genital mutilation. Finland is more open than the other Nordics to including the private sector in development, which may be related to its smaller resource base.⁶¹

Concluding remarks

The focus of the study reported in this article was on Finnish UN policy in the 2000s from the perspective of Nordic identity, which we considered to be value-based, expressive and instrumental. Overall, emphasising the collective Nordic identity helped in framing the policy. As demonstrated, Nordic cooperation is value-based, intense and often informal diplomatic interaction, supporting the assumption of a collective identity. Even if Finnish UN policy documents emphasise the relevance of the EU framework, our interview data indicates that the Nordics often constitute an even more strongly preferred reference group. However, the intensity of Nordic identity has varied, and was challenged by European identity especially in the early 2000s. Its relevance increased in the 2010s as the multilateral environment became more challenging (see also Brommesson et al., 2023). Furthermore, EU cooperation does not always produce optimal outcomes from the Nordic perspective. Cooperation among the NB8 has increased recently, but there are still limitations, such as on questions of peace and security and development. Hence, Nordic identity is competing with other potential collective identities, but has maintained its priority status. Even if Finland shows strong commitment to the Nordics, pragmatism and situational relevance might influence its concrete policymaking at the UN (see Ojanen and Raunio, 2018).

57. Interview 8.6.

58. Interviews 2.6.;8.6; 28.6.

59. Interviews 2.6.; 8.6.; 28.6.; 23.8.

60. Interview 28.6.; 23.8.

61. Interview 2.6.

As we have demonstrated, Finnish UN policy has been rather stable in the 2000s. Finnish priorities and working methods have expressed a traditional, pragmatic Nordic UN orientation (see Wivel, 2017). Dedicated support for UN institutions, treaties and normative frames in alliance with the other Nordics is prioritised. Given the limited resources, the EU and the Nordic group are compelled to pool them, especially as the UN agenda is expanding. Interestingly, Finnish UN policy has moved from an institutional approach towards thematic prioritisation. Although Nordic identity commonly refers to shared values and thematic priorities, the Nordics are also competing for status and visibility. Finland needs to update its profile in national thematic niche areas such as water diplomacy and technology, and to differentiate itself from its Nordic peers. On the one hand, individuality matters when serving in visible UN positions, for example as a member of the HRC (see Tuominen, 2022) or the SC, but on the other hand the Nordics express their identity in these bodies through common statements. Our findings support the idea of friendly status-seeking among the Nordics (Røren, 2019); they respect each other's initiatives and working space, even without formal negotiations. In the following we summarise some of our key finding regarding Nordic identity and the three UN pillars.

In terms of peace and security, the Nordics have focused on similar themes and priorities reflecting the value-based dimension of identity. Nordic identity is especially visible in peace mediation and the WPS agenda in that the states also compete and develop their own niche areas. Within the SC the Nordic group strongly expresses its common identity through electoral cooperation, joint statements and events. However, the well-known Nordic peace brand also serves national endeavours instrumentally. EU integration and its implications for security policies diminished the Nordic identity temporarily. Following its lost SC campaign, Finland also sought partnership beyond the Nordics, the Friendship Group with Turkey on peace mediation being one example. Security concerns, interests and institutional commitments are currently more closely aligned than ever among the Nordics, supporting the situational relevance of a common identity in peace and security. NB8 cooperation could increase the weight of the group, but it is clearly a secondary option for Finland.

According to our findings, strengthening support for the UN human-rights system and advocating norms is prioritised among all the Nordics (see also Björkdahl, 2007; Tuominen, 2023b). They also share several thematic priorities and aim to act more ambitiously within the EU. Hence, the common identity in this field is undeniable, and the cooperation is informal and intense. However, differentiating within this progressive peer group and developing distinct profiles may be tough. Given the need to avoid an exclusive group mentality, expressions of a shared identity occur in statements, not resolutions. Nordic-Baltic cooperation is most intense on human-rights issues. However, success also often depends on finding partners from other regions, and the mainly positive Nordic brand frequently serves Finnish interests in this endeavour.

Nordic identity has traditionally been strong in development issues, related specifically to aid volumes, gender equality, poverty reduction and sustainable development. Differences among the Nordics in aid volumes and targets have grown in the 2000s due to domestic factors (Kjaer et al., 2022). Despite the cooperation and common themes, there are also individual country profiles; and despite the competition and various niche areas, joint Nordic statements are provided in many UN forums, expressing a common identity. Sustaining its Nordic aid identity has been instrumentally important for Finland, which has lagged behind its peers. Hence, the instrumental dimension is most visible in this pillar. As we have demonstrated, the importance of the development policy and of resources has varied among governments in the 2000s, making the policy pragmatically oriented and less foreseeable, and sometimes going against Nordic identity (see Ojanen and Raunio, 2018, 414). Pragmatism also concerns cooperation with the Baltics, which are not seen as equal contributors to

the UN.

In conclusion, Nordic identity and its different forms seem relevant in terms of understanding Finnish UN policy, even if there is slight variation among the UN pillars. Nordic identity is reflected in all the dimensions, through values and expressions but also instrumentally. Given the scarcity of academic research on Finnish UN policy, this article makes an interesting contribution to the wider discussion on the currency of the Nordic group. Our conclusions emphasise only one dimension, namely a common identity, hence there is still a need to study other aspects of Finnish UN policy. The research topic is timely as Finland's next SC candidacy campaign is approaching and the new Government has promised eventually to update Finland's UN strategy. In a world of heightened geopolitical challenges and contestation, the cooperating Nordics constitute an influential reference group for Finland.

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Appendix I. List of Interviewees

Tarja Halonen, President of Finland 2000-2012, Foreign Minister 1995-2000

Ambassadors, Permanent Representatives, Deputy Permanent Representatives:

2005-2009 Kirsti Lintonen, Ambassador, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations, New York

2009-2014 Jarmo Viinanen, Ambassador, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations, New York

2010-2015 Janne Taalas, Deputy Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations, New York

2019-2022 Jukka Salovaara, Ambassador, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations, New York

2022- Elina Kalkku, Ambassador, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of Finland to the United Nations, New York

Heads of UN Units, Ministry for Foreign Affairs:

Satu Lassila, Director, Unit for UN Development and Innovation Issues, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Erik Lundberg, Deputy Director General, Political Department, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Anna Salovaara, Director, Unit for UN and General Global Affairs, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Ann-Mari Fröberg, Team Leader, Unit for Human Rights Policy, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Thematic ambassadors:

Rauno Merisaari, Ambassador for democracy and human rights, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Katri Viinikka, Ambassador for equality issues, Unit for Human Rights Policy, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Other UN policy experts:

Karoliina Heikinheimo-Pérez, First Secretary (Human Rights), Permanent Mission of Finland to the UN in Geneva

Marikki Karhu, Secretary General of the Finnish Development Policy Committee, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland

Eeva-Liisa Myllymäki, Counsellor, Ministry for Foreign Affairs (retired)

Appendix II. List of Policy Documents

Finnish UN Priorities at the General Assembly 2010-2020 (lacking years 2016 and 2020-21), collected from the webpages of the Finnish Parliament (2010-14) and the Archives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Final report from the Finnish UN Embassy in New York (1998-2005) (by Ambassador Marjatta Rasi)

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