Discussion Article

Nordic, European, or Atlanticist? Finland's state identity during the post-Cold War period

Iro Särkkä, Postdoctoral Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Abstract

This discussion article explores the interplay of three distinctive but overlapping geographically driven state identities – Nordic, European, and Atlanticist identities in Finland's official foreign policy discourse during the post-Cold War period (1995–2022). It shows that state identities are used to achieve both physical and ontological security. These geographically defined identities are mutually inclusive and complimentary in character, building on one another. The discussion article argues that even as a member of NATO, Finland should emphasise the Nordic identity, which forms the basis of Finland's fundamental value-based security community.

Keywords

State identity, Finland, Nordicity, physical security, ontological security

Introduction

In this discussion article, I analyse the significance of Nordicity, Europeanness, and Atlanticism in Finland's state identity during the post-Cold War period. I define state identity as being constitutive of two essential dimensions. The first dimension concerns the normative beliefs and values relating to a state's existence. The second dimension concerns the type of role or active agency that a state is seeking to play with its significant others. To ground my argument, I study the Finnish government reports (white papers) on foreign, security, and defence policy during the post-Cold War period (1995–2022). I examine how three institutional frameworks – the European Union (EU), NATO, and the defence cooperation between the Nordic countries – have constituted Finland's state identity.

This discussion article focuses on identity from a state perspective, the so-called *state identity,* which in its most simple form denotes what the country is and what it stands for (Ashizawa, 2008, p. 575). It describes those qualities that state elites ascribe to in determining the state's foreign policy orientation within the international community (Al Toraifi, 2012, p. 46). Hence, state identity 'is not just a descriptive character of a state', but also a social and relational concept reflecting its relations with other states (Ashizawa, 2008, p. 575; Jepperson et al., 1996; Wendt, 1999). It assumes that states, like people, seek to acquire relatively stable, role-specific understandings of themselves in international relations (Wendt, 1992, p. 398).

The internal and external distinction of state identity might be also useful in this regard: internal identity refers to state's coherent self-entity as an agent in international relations, whereas external identity is distinctively identifiable from other states (Kowert, 1998, p. 6–7). For instance, geographical denotations such as Eastern, Western, Northern, or Southern or value-based denotations such as authoritarian, democratic, liberal, or conservative help states to map themselves in global politics and identify with significant partners, allies, and adversaries.

The concept of identity, however, entails a deeper understanding and internalisation of one's position in the global community than mere role-seeking. Identity means an in-depth understanding of one's values, norms, and principles to be promoted in the threshold of a security community. Security communities have the capacity to create a sense of collective identity to its members, which distinguishes them from security regimes and other collective security arrangements. This means a wider understanding of how states pursue their national interests by developing trust and regional culture through common norms and values within their respective communities (Acharya, 2002, pp. 21–23).

Stable conceptions of the self are reinforced through socialisation within these cultural environments of security, which provides a ground for intersubjective identity building (Katzenstein et al., 1996). In this discussion article I argue that in addition to participation in international organisations (IOs) (Berenskoetter and Giegerich, 2010, pp. 422–423), regional bi- and minilateral cooperation formats, such as Nordic Defence Cooperation, can serve as platforms of cultural environments for one's identity-building. Through collaboration and cooperation with like-minded friendly nations that codify both formal and informal norms and rules, minilateral cooperation can also work as a motivational force in socialising collective knowledge building (Wendt, 1992, p. 399).

Theories of ontological security can shed some understanding on why this is so.

As much as states are physical security providers and seekers, fearing and protecting themselves from specific threats, they also seek ontological security: the security of the self (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 344). Ontological security theories assume that as well as having specific threats or fears, actors also experience anxiety of not knowing how and which specific threats to deal with (Krickel-Choi, 2022, p. 6). A concrete example is the growing emergence of hybrid threats, which shows how undesirable and destabilising chaos might be lurking behind the corner even in peacetime.

As states must deal with a chaotic and uncertain state of global affairs, a more stable sense of the self and a fulfilment of their sense of agency is achieved through routinisation of foreign relations with other states. By increasing basic trust and anchoring social relations in both bilateral and multilateral security frameworks, states increase social trust with one another, creating a shared sense of intersubjectivity and cognitive control. To create a sense of order and continuity, various daily routines are performed (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 747). Thus, it is not capabilities but habits that determine state identity (Mitzen, 2006b, pp. 271–274).

This discussion article asserts that one's sense of security is created not only by relying on material structures and physical security, but also by habitual relations and routines with significant others. Particularly in disruptive times, when a sense of security and cognitive control is blurred, identifying and cooperating with the like-minded can reinforce trust, predictability, self-control (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 746), and a sense of belonging to a specific security community of states. These routinised relationships with friends, like-minded allies, enable promoting a stable sense of the self.

Thus, ontological security as much as physical security is important in constructing stable state identities. However, what makes it difficult to study and identify state identities is the nature of constant change. By their nature, identities are never static but temporary attachments that 'cannot be reduced to a single spatial or temporal source' (Campbell, 1998, p. 74). Instead, they should rather be viewed as a 'process of becoming' (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 748). Hence, although it might be impossible to trace a single source or a written document that fully depicts state identity, one can analyse changes in state identities through a longer period of time by comparing and analysing the content of different documents. Government papers on foreign, security, and defence policy constitute a logical source of analysis for tracking change in state identity.

Three phases of Finland's state identity in the post-Cold War period

The following discussion identifies three phases of temporal state identity development in Finland's foreign and security policy during the post-Cold War period. Firstly, there is the era of Europeanisation from the 1990s until the 2010s when Finland joined the European Union and framed itself as an EU member state. Secondly, there is the period of the rebirth of Nordic identity and cooperation in the 2010s and the 2020s, which coincides with the rise of Nordic defence cooperation. And thirdly, there is the emergence of an era of so-called Atlanticist state identity in the late 2010s and the early 2020s with fortifying bilateral relations with the United States when the transatlantic link started to grow stronger.

As a full member of the European Union since 1995, Finland's foreign and security policy position developed in relation to the particularly strong governance and institutional dimension of the EU in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. This identification with a new European reference group of nations fundamentally changed Finland's reference group thinking and brought Finland into the Western like-minded group of nations. This had two implications for Finland's state identity. Firstly, Finland sought active and diligent involvement in the EU-led Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and security and defence policy initiatives. Finland's participation in the EU's civilian crisis management activities and military crisis management operations were concrete examples of the country's commitment to the European security community.

Finland's active involvement in developing these instruments, however, was not in itself enough to lay the ground for a European identity. The other objective was to 'Europeanise' Finland, which meant sharing European values and a strong bond with other European nations. This entailed the idea of Finland as a member of the same security culture with shared political values of dignity, the freedom of movement, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights as enshrined in the EU founding treaties.

Secondly, in the absence of an explicit physical threat, Finland sought not only physical but ontological security through an active involvement in European affairs. Identifying and becoming European meant accepting reciprocal clauses of EU treaties, particularly the solidarity and mutual security clause, without challenging Finland's special character as a militarily non-allied state. However, it also led to questioning the tangible value of European security arrangements. As the EU encompasses a vast geographical area – with neighbours of various kinds – the practical value of EU as a security community was questioned. Despite various defence and security initiatives, gradual blurring of Finland's state agency in European affairs occurred. A question was raised of who could Finland ultimately trust if the security situation deteriorated in Finland's immediate geographical region.

Against this reasoning, the regenesis of Nordicity in Finland's state identity was no surprise. Regardless of a strong European focus in the post-Cold War years, Nordicity or Nordicness never disappeared from Finland's state identity. Finland's long historical roots with the Nordic countries amplified Finland's strong sense of belonging to both the geographical region and the cultural area Norden (Brommesson, 2018, p. 391), which made it relatively easy to revoke Nordicity.

During the Cold War, Finland's Nordic identity served as an important corner stone of foreign policy and offered an attractive alternative to distance Finland from the Soviet orbit. At the same time, it provided Finland an alternative agency, attached to the peaceful alternative of Norden (Browning, 2008, pp. 195–1977). Despite these developments, the merits of Nordicity were at times questioned in the immediate post-Cold War years (Browning, 2008, p. 238).

There was, however, a new aspect attached to the state identity perspective in the late 2000s. Finland's new Nordic agency was discussed in the realm of Finland's foreign and security policy and her relations with the other Nordic defence cooperation countries (Nordefco). Especially in the early years of Nordefco, there was a strong willingness to bring added value by strengthening Nordic cooperation through these deepened minilateral cooperation formats. For Finland, the relationship with Sweden became particularly important as Sweden was Finland's closest bilateral ally and found herself in a similar position with Finland as a non-NATO member. The trilateral statements of intent between Finland, Sweden, and Norway in 2020 and further in 2022 can be interpreted as contributing factors to a strong and active Nordic agency (Särkkä, 2022). These materialistic and instrumental gains, however, would not have been fulfilled without a shared sense of Nordic identity.

Thirdly and most importantly, Nordicity developed through a common understanding of security norms and values, the so-called shared understanding of Nordic solidarity (Haugevik and Svendrup, 2019, p. 21). In addition, this Nordic exceptionalism in international relations developed around the aims and values of international peace, disarmament, solidarity, ecological sustainability, and cooperation with third world countries (Ojanen and Raunio, 2018, p. 9). In Finland, too, these values were internalised as part of the foreign and security policy agenda and state identity. However, not even Nordicity was completely immune to exogenous threats in the security environment.

While the Nordic solidarity declaration from 2011 promoted democracy, international law, gender equality, and sustainable development amongst the Nordic countries, it failed to address the physical security dilemma of Russia's emerging threat in the Nordic–Baltic region. Therefore, despite reinforcing mutual trust, the Nordic identity did not fix the problem of deterring from a specific external threat. Although Nordic identity provided Finland with a certain sense of being safe, the limits of both Nordic bi- and minilateral formats of cooperation were obvious. Deterring a specific threat, that of Russia, was not a task for the Nordic but the transatlantic security community.

With the outbreak of Russia's brutal war in Ukraine, Finland had to address and reassess the limits of its state identity. Historically speaking, Finland's relationship with the transatlantic community has not been an unproblematic one. During the Cold War, Finland was neither allowed to maintain close relations with the US nor join NATO due to its special relationship with the USSR, governed by the provisions in the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance.

After the Cold War, Finland moved closer to the West, which replaced the language of neutrality with Westernising narratives, 'a linear story from whom we were in the past up until present', a kind of 'emplotment' caused by identity transformation (Browning, 2008, p. 46). There was, however, neither strong political nor public support for NATO membership. The Western focus gave Finland a stronger ground to reach out for closer relations with NATO and the US (Talmor and Zelden, 2017, p. 160).

Building a strong relationship with NATO was a strong identity-related question for Finland but in a more subtle way. Whereas countries that joined NATO in the first enlargement rounds in 1999 and 2004 were seeking shelter from Russia, Finland and Sweden wished to profile themselves in an opposite way, not as beneficiaries but as contributors to international peace, yet nudging closer to the transatlantic community as partners. Being an international peace contributor was an important identity for Finland, manifested in NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) cooperation (Browning, 2008, p. 249–250).

Finland actively participated in NATO-led crisis management missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo as well as in the NATO-led coalition force in Afghanistan. In 2014, Finland's relationship with NATO was further deepened through participation in NATO's Enhanced Opportunities (EOP) initiative, followed by reinforced bilateral ties with the United States in the late 2010s. Russia's second war in Ukraine in 2022 caused a sharp turn in Finland's policy of military non-alignment and led both Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership. Finland's membership in the Alliance was completed in April 2023, bringing the era of military non-alignment to an end. An indisputable motivator for such a policy choice was Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine, which worked like an avalanche, first among the Finnish public and then among politicians.

During this process, NATO and the transatlantic link were not portrayed as Finland's value community as strongly as the European and Nordic counterparts. It can be explained by the fact that during the post-Cold War period, NATO was not internalised in Finland's foreign and security policy as a constituting factor of state identity but rather as an enabling factor of security cooperation. Rather Finland's relationship with NATO was instrumental, emphasising the relevance of different means and tools that Finland's partnership with the Alliance enabled.

Finland is now at the beginning of a new path. Should the decision to join NATO be considered as a depiction of Finland's evolving state identity, which is arguably now closer to the Atlanticist approach than ever before? Although Finland was redefining its state identity and explicitly stated that Finland joined a value-based community, completing Finland's unification with other Western states is far from complete. Finland must now fully internalise the norms and values of being a member of the transatlantic security community. This will require explicitly stating that Finland adheres to the values and norms of NATO, which complement Finland's state identity. On a deeper level, Finland must now live up to the standards and values of the security community.

Three overlapping state identities – a mix of state identity politics?

After becoming a full member of NATO, Finland has now threefold external state identities: European, Nordic, and Atlanticist. Will the three distinctive, yet overlapping state identities pose an identity dilemma for Finland? Although geographically different, European, Nordic, and Atlanticist identities have the same normative value base that cherishes democracy, liberalism, human rights, equality, and the rule of law.

A constructivist would argue that Finland is capable of internalising multiple state identities. State identities are not mutually exclusive but inclusive and complimentary, developing through longer periods of time. A strong emphasis on European state identity during the post-Cold War period created a strong basis for Finland's international value-based community. A sense of trust and mutual reciprocity between the Nordic countries reinforced Finland's positioning of the self in international relations. The third layer, becoming a member of the transatlantic value community, is a step that Finland needs to take in the years to come.

As a newly accepted member of NATO, Finland will now have to think about how to manifest Nordic identity within each of the three different security communities. If the sense of belonging to a Nordic group of nations is so strong, what practical implications could it have for defence cooperation? Should the Nordic countries try to act in unison as much as possible to advance the Nordic front just for the sake of being Nordic? Or should they flexibly advance Nordic values and interests in NATO?

Furthermore, while recognising the practical and instrumental value of Nordic cooperation and making sure that security in the Nordic region is maintained, the Nordics should continue to show an example of a sustainable value community within the wider Euro–Atlantic community, enforcing certain principles, values, and peaceful ways of cooperating.

In doing so, upholding the norms and values that are intrinsic to the strong Nordic identity, each Nordic state has a role to play in defining Nordicity. Maintaining and strengthening Nordic identity is particularly important for Finland because it reinforces both physical and ontological security. Common Nordic ways of coordinating, best practices, and routines enhance trust and a sense of control, helping Finland to deal with any possible future threats.

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