

Peer-Reviewed Article

Naturalising nuclear deterrence: A comparative analysis of Finnish and Swedish discourses on nuclear weapon politics, 2016–22

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Abstract

Finland and Sweden's decisions to join NATO not only marks the end of a long period of neutrality and military non-alignment for the Nordic neighbours - they also require major shifts in their policies and self-perceptions related to nuclear weapons, disarmament, and nuclear deterrence. Drawing on a comparative research design and theory on depoliticisation, this article analyses how joining a nuclear alliance was made possible in two historical contexts marked by traditional opposition towards nuclear weapons. Comparing domestic deliberations about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and NATO membership between 2016–2022, our findings suggest that two key narratives are essential for understanding how the nuclear dimension of NATO membership was reconciled in both countries. First, 'the virtue of (disarmament) pragmatism' narrative centres around how the historically stratified Finnish pragmatic approach to nuclear disarmament served as a guiding principle in both countries. Second, 'the necessity of extended (nuclear) deterrence' narrative enabled the nuclear dimension of NATO membership to become reconciled with Finland and Sweden's historically neutral and non-aligned policies.

Keywords

Nuclear disarmament, extended nuclear deterrence, depoliticisation, Baltic Sea region, NATO enlargement

Introduction

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Finland and Sweden applied for membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO. This constitutes one of the most fundamental security shifts in the region since the end of the Cold War. To various extents, neutrality was a central feature of Cold War security policy and national identity in both countries (Rainio-Niemi, 2014), and both made themselves known as staunch supporters of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, albeit with slight differences in their profiles (cf. Juntunen, 2023; Rosengren, 2020). Their decisions to join NATO – an alliance reliant on extended nuclear deterrence – not only marks the end of a long period of neutrality and military non-alignment for Finland and Sweden but will also require a major shift in their policies and self-perceptions related to nuclear weapons, disarmament, and extended nuclear deterrence.

Focusing on the nuclear dimension of NATO, this article compares domestic deliberations about nuclear weapons, disarmament and extended nuclear deterrence in Finland and Sweden from 2016 to 2022 in two successive contexts: debates about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) from 2017, and about NATO membership after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The aim is to reveal how joining a nuclear alliance was made possible in two historical contexts marked by non-alignment and opposition towards nuclear weapons. Drawing on insights from research that treats security policy as “a product of social and discursive construction” (Hagström, 2021, p. 142) and on literature about depoliticisation as an analytical tool for understanding radical policy change (Wood, 2015), our analysis unpacks national narratives that enabled Finland and Sweden's turns towards reliance on extended nuclear deterrence.

Rather than explaining why Finland and Sweden changed their nuclear weapon policies and applied for NATO membership, our analysis exposes how “interpretative dispositions [regarding nuclear weapons] were socially constructed such that certain practices were made possible” (Doty, 1993, p. 298). While Finland and Sweden have not, at any point in history, followed a completely identical path regarding nuclear weapons and disarmament, we argue that an analytical focus on depoliticisation and naturalisation in domestic debates sheds light both on contemporary discourses about nuclear disarmament, NATO enlargement and nuclear deterrence, and on the changing role of nuclear weapons in the Nordics.

Case selection

There are similarities that make a comparison of nuclear discourses in Finland and Sweden especially fruitful. First, joining a nuclear alliance stands at odds with their historical legacies as non-aligned advocates for nuclear disarmament, even though NATO (2022) envisions a world free from nuclear weapons. Second, both share a geopolitical position neighbouring Russia and applied for NATO membership after Russia had openly challenged the existing regional security order by attacking Ukraine, one of its non-nuclear and non-allied neighbouring states.

Nonetheless, there are also differences between the two, not least regarding their historical relationship with one another. First, Sweden has a historical past as a colonial ruler of what is now known as Finnish territory, whereas Finland has been both under Swedish and Russian imperial rule. That said, Finland also enjoyed periods of relatively autonomous status before its independence in 1917, inheriting the key characteristics of its administrative system from Sweden (on the complex role of colonialism in Finland's history, see Merivirta, Koivunen and Särkkä, 2021). While Sweden recently celebrated what is often described as 200 years of peace (Biltekin, Petersson and Müller,

2022), Finland's experience in the Second World War is part of collective national memory (Kivimäki, 2012).

Second, while Finland and Sweden have been engaged in close defence policy cooperation during the post-Cold War era (Juntunen and Pesu, 2018), their security political decisions have diverged to some extent. For example, Finland maintained its conscription-based army during this period, implying a continuity from the total defence doctrine of the Cold War, whereas Sweden reformed its defence policy more thoroughly, including the introduction of a voluntary conscription policy (Strand, 2019). These contextual differences are likely to have consequences for how joining a nuclear alliance has been perceived in both countries.

Furthermore, there have also been slight differences in Finland and Sweden's historical nuclear disarmament profiles. Swedish disarmament engagement evolved in parallel with an intense debate about whether Sweden should acquire its own tactical nuclear weapons in the 1950s and 60s, a debate which caused a national split (Rosengren, 2020). In this context, international disarmament engagement evolved as "an exit" from the nuclear weapon option (Jonter, 2016; Jonter and Rosengren, 2014). After Sweden joined the Eighteen Nations Disarmament Committee in 1962, disarmament remained a central feature of Cold War Swedish security policy (Jonter and Rosengren, 2024). Finland took its first initiative on international nuclear disarmament in the 1960s when President Urho Kekkonen proposed the establishment of a Nordic Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (Juntunen, 2024). Finland's Cold War disarmament policy relied upon support for gradual or incremental disarmament, where the leading great powers (and later, recognised nuclear weapon states) should always be involved as key interlocutors. During this period, Sweden had a more progressive and far-reaching profile than Finland (Juntunen, 2023).

In the post-Cold War period, disarmament slowly faded as a Swedish policy priority (Jonter and Rosengren, 2024). Having joined the European Union in 1995, both Finland and Sweden acted as "bridge-builders" between those in the union in favour of nuclear deterrence and those leaning towards more abolitionist approaches (Onderco and Portela, 2023). While Swedish social democratic governments initiated the New Agenda Coalition (NAC), the Weapons of Mass Destruction Commission, and the de-alerting group in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the conservative government (2006–2014) withdrew from both the NAC and the de-alerting group (Jonter and Rosengren, 2024). Finland had a slightly more cautious approach, reminiscent of the bridge-building role embraced during the Cold War (Pesu and Juntunen, 2023, pp. 6–7). Especially in recent years, Finland's traditional pragmatic approach to disarmament has collided with demands in international society to reinforce the norm against nuclear weapons (Juntunen, 2018; Pesu and Juntunen, 2023). In this article, we argue that the above-mentioned similarities and differences make contemporary nuclear weapon discourses in Finland and Sweden an intriguing case for comparison and historical contextualisation.

Theoretical and methodological framework

To investigate the nuclear dimension of NATO membership in Finland and Sweden, we draw on a discourse analytical approach and theory about depoliticisation. We perceive discourses as "regimes of truth" which regulate both who is allowed to speak and what is allowed to be spoken about (Milliken, 1999). We understand politicisation and depoliticisation as the "processes of discursive contestation, during which policy actors either 'emphasise' the presence of 'political agency' – that is, they assert that collective action to change policy decisions is both desirable and possible – or they 'deny' that such agency could or should be exercised" (Wood, 2015, p. 3). Depoliticisation can involve a certain policy being described as unavoidable, as beyond political deliberation, or that

one conceptualisation of a problem becomes so dominating that alternatives become perceived as “mad, evil or inconceivable” (Eduards et al, 2023, p. 40). Hence, depoliticisation processes “involve establishing necessities and immobility” (Åse and Wendt, 2019, p. 18) and entail “concealing/negating or removing contingency” (Jenkins, 2011, p. 160). Understood inversely, politicisation can thus be understood “as an active use of contingency, of rendering something contested or controversial” (Wiesner, 2019, p. 257).

In our analysis, we unpack national narratives that have enabled policy change towards reliance on extended nuclear deterrence. Serving as maps for how to structure and order experiences and perceived realities, narratives are “schemes of intelligibility, seeking to replace uncertainty with a sense that the world is basically knowable and explainable” (Edenborg, 2016, p. 42). As one key function of narratives is to make experiences and perceived realities comprehensible, they rely on excluding that which does not fit in, of that which “complicates, blurs or contradicts the story” (ibid). At the same time, narratives also normalise/naturalise things by making them appear as “self-evident, incontestable and non-controversial” (Sandman, 2019, p. 28). References to imagined collective identity, and to notions of belonging, contribute to such naturalisation processes.

Discourses, depoliticisation and narratives are fundamentally intertwined. As regimes of truth, discourses set boundaries for how the world can be conceptualised. Depoliticisation makes certain lines of action appear as necessary and natural whereas alternatives are sidelined and/or dismissed. Since narratives rely on simplification and exclusion, they are central for depoliticisation (ibid). In representing certain things as “necessary and determined”, narratives also foreclose alternative possibilities (Edenborg, 2016, p. 43). Narratives are productive as they enable problem formulations and solutions (Hagström, 2021, p. 143) and are contestable (Edenborg, 2016, p. 24). Hence, paying attention to how narratives about nuclear weapons, disarmament, and deterrence have become naturalised, for example, “by appearing as fundamentally necessary, natural, existential or sacral – as standing above political consideration” (Åse and Wendt, 2019, p. 18), and how they have been contested, is central in our analysis. Against this backdrop, the following theory driven research questions guide our analysis: How has reliance on extended nuclear deterrence become depoliticised and, in effect, naturalised in Finland and Sweden? Which national narratives have enabled this policy change?

Comparative analysis is especially suitable for disentangling discourses, depoliticisation and narratives, and in effect naturalisation. Through comparison, we aim to both “individualise and contrast” nuclear discourses in Finland and Sweden (cf. Aronsson, 2008, p. 9). Historical contextualisation facilitates individualisation and sheds light on continuities and changes over time. By contrasting the cases with each other, we will both develop deeper knowledge about each respective case and explore unexpected dimensions by working with both cases (Wendt, 2020, p. 245). A comparative design is especially suitable for analysing depoliticisation, as it reveals “how the seemingly banal, or self-evident, in one context appears strange or contested in another” (ibid, p. 243). Comparison thus facilitates the denaturalisation of that which might appear as irrelevant to a national insider. Furthermore, comparison helps locate absences – “phenomena that are systematically excluded” that can only be revealed through comparison with another case (Gómez and Kuronen, 2011, p. 694).

Despite its advantages, comparison also poses challenges, especially as it requires both deep contextual knowledge and the ability to overcome “national imaginary and its truths” (Åse and Wendt, 2019, p. 21). As insiders in one respective national context, we have the “linguistic skills, a deep understanding of the wider cultural framework, and extensive knowledge of the political and

social conditions and national history” (Wendt, 2020, p. 246) regarding both Finland and Sweden. As outsiders in relation to each other’s cases, we can shed light on that which the insider takes for granted and thereby reveal silences. By being able to conduct a detailed and contextually rich analysis of our respective cases, and by zooming out when we compare our findings, we can both keep “analytical closeness” and “analytical distance” in our interpretations of the sources (ibid, p. 250).

While trying to keep a stringent approach to sources, our selection criteria have been adapted to national circumstances, considering the slight differences in the structures of foreign policy decision-making and debate, geographical location, and historical experiences in Finland and Sweden. For analysing the Finnish case, our sources include parliamentary debates, reports and statements by parliament committees, government reports and programs, statements, interviews by key decision-makers (especially the president, prime minister, and foreign minister) and major Finnish media and news outlets such as *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Iltalehti* and *Iltasanomat*. For analysing Sweden, we have included government statements, parliamentary bills and debates, and media sources from the four largest national newspapers: *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet*. These newspapers cover a broad spectrum of political affiliations.

We have used a combination of the search words “nuclear weapons”, “nuclear ban” and “NATO” to ensure broad coverage from the sources. Our initial reading of the full collection of sources, alongside previous research about the topics discussed, made it possible to identify key national narratives about nuclear weapons, disarmament and extended nuclear deterrence in both contexts. As a second step, we delimited the source collection to those sources where these narratives were clearly articulated and we used the above-mentioned research questions in a systematic analysis based on these sources.

Analysis

In this section, we compare nuclear discourses in Finland and Sweden from 2016 to 2022. The disposition is organised around key narratives that our comparison identified. In the first narrative, “the virtue of (disarmament) pragmatism”, the historically stratified Finnish pragmatic approach to nuclear disarmament served as a guiding principle in both countries. The second narrative, “the necessity of extended (nuclear) deterrence”, centres around how the nuclear dimension of NATO membership was reconciled with Finland and Sweden’s historically neutral and non-aligned policies, and their nuclear disarmament advocacy legacies. Our analysis also reveals how notions of identity and belonging were central in the establishment of both narratives.

Narrative 1. The virtue of (disarmament) pragmatism

The TPNW was adopted by the UN General Assembly on July 7, 2017. While the treaty entered into force in 2021, none of the nuclear weapon states have signed it. The initiative dates back to the 2010 review conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) from 1968 which rests upon three pillars: non-proliferation of nuclear weapons to states that did not possess them when the treaty entered into force, the right to peaceful use of nuclear energy for all state parties, and obligations of the nuclear weapon states to negotiate nuclear disarmament “in good faith” (for historical analysis of the making of the NPT, see Hunt, 2022). While compliance with the first two pillars has been rather successful, nuclear weapon states have not lived up to their disarmament commitments. Therefore, and inspired by the landmine and cluster munition conventions which ban these weapons based on international humanitarian law (Garcia, 2011), non-nuclear weapon states

and civil society organisations under the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) umbrella initiated a campaign for a complete ban of nuclear weapons (Considine, 2019; Hanson, 2018; Ritchie, 2019; Ritchie and Egeland, 2018).

An early step on the road to the TPNW was a statement about the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons delivered by South Africa on behalf of 80 states in 2013, the basis for the Humanitarian Initiative. Neither Finland nor Sweden signed it but they did participate in the first two Humanitarian Initiative conferences in Norway in 2013 and in Mexico in 2014. When states reconvened in Austria in 2014, neither Finland nor Sweden signed the outcome document. The same year, and with a new Social Democrat government in place, Sweden joined the Humanitarian Initiative. When states met in New York to negotiate the TPNW in 2017, Sweden, as opposed to Finland, participated (Jonter and Rosengren, 2024) but ultimately, both countries refrained from signing the treaty.

The integrity of the NPT regime

A key feature of Finnish nuclear disarmament policy has been its historically enduring support for the integrity of the NPT as the cornerstone of multilateral nuclear disarmament diplomacy. Since the 1960s, Finland has emphasised the responsibility of the nuclear weapon states in advancing nuclear disarmament. This has led Finland to not support initiatives that the recognised nuclear weapon states do not perceive as legitimate (see Juntunen, 2018; 2023). This approach was especially salient in Finland's position on the TPNW, distinguishing its pragmatic and gradualist approach from those demanding more progressive steps. At times, Finland's official stance was more conservative than those of NATO members like the Netherlands and Norway.

In June 2016, a few months before the UN decided to initiate TPNW negotiations, the centre-right government led by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä already stressed the importance of the NPT and the virtue of disarmament pragmatism in its white paper on security and foreign policy (Finnish Government, 2016, p. 31). While arms control and confidence-building measures were described as important for regional stability, the role of nuclear weapons as instruments of power politics was assumed to be rising (ibid, p. 16). Finland's role was described to centre around technical expertise regarding the implementation of arms control agreements and NPT safeguards. While in the white paper the government supported international action against violations of international humanitarian law, in fall 2016 it considered the TPNW process a distraction from the disarmament pragmatism it endorsed. Hence, unlike Sweden, Finland did not support TPNW negotiations. The integrity of the NPT, and the support from the nuclear weapon states, were described as prerequisites to achieve "concrete results" (Juntunen, 2018, p. 52).

The decision made by the Sipilä government caused a minor debate in Finland, breaking down the traditional consensus on foreign policy (on Finland's consensual foreign policy decision-making, see Forsberg, 2023a, p. 92; Raunio, 2021). The left-leaning opposition in parliament united in their criticism. Li Andersson, leader of the Left Alliance, criticised the passivity of Sipilä's government and argued that the TPNW would not jeopardise the NPT as both aimed to achieve nuclear disarmament. She also challenged the government's break from other non-aligned states, such as Austria, Ireland, and Sweden, which voted in favour of negotiations (Andersson, 2016). Around the same time, Finnish experts, scholars, and former diplomats also engaged in critical debate on the government policy in op-eds and columns (see e.g., Erästö, 2016; Ojanen, 2016; cf. Patokallio, 2017).

Considering such criticism, Foreign Minister Timo Soini from the Finns Party praised the virtues of continuity and pragmatism in historical Finnish foreign policy. Soini reiterated that Finland would only support initiatives supported by the nuclear weapon states that would advance disarmament

in practice, thereby enhancing security and stability (Soini, 2016). The TPNW was not considered to promote these goals. The pragmatist virtues in Finland's stance – highlighting the responsibility and practical significance of the P5 – were reiterated in a memorandum by the Unit for Arms Control in the Finnish MFA in 2017 (see Simonen, 2018, pp. 8–9). Moreover, the memorandum stated that the forthcoming TPNW negotiations would likely increase polarisation in nuclear disarmament diplomacy and, thus, distract the upcoming NPT review cycle.

In October 2017, shortly after ICAN won the Nobel Peace Prize, the main opposition parties in Finland again criticised the government's conservatism on disarmament. The chair of the main opposition party, social democrat Antti Rinne, together with former Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto from the Green League and Paavo Arhinmäki of the Left Alliance, all of whom were also members of the Foreign Affairs Committee in parliament, demanded that Finland sign the TPNW (Auvinen, 2017). Haavisto argued that it would be compatible with Finland's traditional foreign policy line and that Finland was too gentle in its stance towards the nuclear weapon states. Arhinmäki pointed out that Finland departed from the traditional group of neutral and non-aligned European countries and Rinne added that it would have been natural for Finland to at least participate in negotiations which involved most UN member-states. Hence, the opposition tried to politicise the issue. Somewhat surprisingly, Prime Minister Sipilä responded that Finland would consider its stance and have "an open debate" on the TPNW (Päivinen and Sullström, 2017). Foreign Minister Soini and chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee Matti Vanhanen from the Center Party were more reserved. Vanhanen echoed the pragmatist approach, inherited from the 1960s, by highlighting that Finland had traditionally only supported diplomatic processes that involve the countries that were most affected by it.

In November 2017, the Unit for Arms Control in the Finnish MFA shared a more detailed explanation of Finland's TPNW position (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2017). In addition to highlighting the integrity of the NPT, the crucial role of the nuclear weapon states in advancing disarmament, and Finland's long-lasting incremental approach, the memorandum also included more substantial criticism, especially of the vague safeguard and verification formulations in the TPNW (see also Highsmith and Stewart, 2018). The Foreign Affairs Committee, however, was not convinced. In June 2018, it criticised the conservative tenets of the government's disarmament pragmatism (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2018). Unlike the government and the MFA, it argued that the TPNW and the NPT could develop in tandem, as stated in the preamble of the TPNW. Moreover, the Foreign Affairs Committee argued that the TPNW was a natural reaction to the dysfunctionalities of the NPT regime. In the end, however, the committee only went as far as to demand that the government should follow the implementation process closely, ideally in close cooperation with Sweden.

The idealism/pragmatism nexus

As opposed to Finland, the Swedish government did participate in negotiations of the TPNW. When Sweden's Foreign Minister Margot Wallström declared her intention to sign the treaty shortly after its conclusion, however, this sparked an intense debate in Sweden. While both the left and green parties in parliament (Lindholm, 2017; Sjöstedt et al, 2017), along with debaters primarily published in the independent social democrat journal *Aftonbladet* (see for example Lindberg, 2017; Andersson, 2018; Peterson and Theorin, 2018), endorsed the foreign minister's ambition, she also faced heavy criticism, especially in the media. The conservative opposition in parliament, but also fractions of the Social Democrat Party, opposed Sweden signing the treaty. Like in Finland, they argued that Sweden should only engage in disarmament initiatives supported by the nuclear weapon states (see for example Lundgren et al, 2017) and that a Swedish signature would put the NPT regime at risk (Kristersson et al, 2019). Moreover, the TPNW was argued to lack sufficient verification mechanisms

(Lundin, 2019). Those opposing the TPNW preferred an incremental approach to disarmament based on the NPT, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Fissile Material Cut Off Treaty (FMCT). This is what Sweden advocated in the 1960s (Rosengren, 2022) and corresponds with the Finnish ‘pragmatic approach’. Hence, advocacy against the TPNW in Finland and Sweden was quite similar.

An interesting feature of the Swedish TPNW debate was how the TPNW was described as a “utopia”, as a “naïve initiative with certain risks” (Dagens Nyheter, 2017a). The NPT was relationally described as the opposite, as “rational” and “useful” (Expressen, 2017a). In addition to being described as idealist, the TPNW was represented as a threat to “Western democracies with nuclear weapons” since authoritarian states “will not care about moral perceptions about disarmament” (Enström, 2017). In debates, Foreign Minister Wallström was associated with the idealist approach whereas Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist was associated with a more “reality-based”, pragmatic, and defence cooperation friendly approach explicitly described as in line with Finland’s position (Expressen, 2017b, see also Dagens Nyheter, 2017a; 2018a).

Divisions between ‘the West’ and the rest, between idealist and pragmatic approaches, were interlinked with a central argument against the TPNW in Sweden – namely that a Swedish signature would put Sweden’s defence cooperation with the US, and its future possibility to join NATO, at risk. In media and parliamentary debates, a letter from US defence minister James Mattis to Hultqvist was used to argue that the relationship between the two states would be negatively affected should Sweden sign the TPNW. Conservative politicians warned that by supporting the TPNW, “we put both our future possibility to become a NATO member and existing cooperation we have with NATO countries, including the US, at risk” (Enström, 2017). While Wallström was argued to “threaten Sweden’s cooperation with NATO” by wanting to sign the TPNW, Hultqvist was described as a voice of reason (Dagens Nyheter, 2017b; Expressen, 2018a). This division led to the labelling of defence cooperation as reasonable and rational, and disarmament advocacy as the opposite. Distinguishing between pragmatic and idealistic disarmament advocacy, and making the Finnish pragmatic approach into an ideal, made it possible to describe the TPNW as incompatible with military cooperation with the US and NATO. Representations of such cooperation as essential to Swedish security interests contributed to naturalise continued support of the NPT at the expense of the TPNW.

After intense debate about whether Sweden should join the TPNW, the government appointed Lars-Erik Lundin, a former diplomat, to investigate its potential consequences. In his final report, he concluded that the verification mechanisms in the TPNW were insufficient and that Swedish security interests would suffer should Sweden sign the treaty (Lundin, 2019). Shortly thereafter, and only a few weeks before her resignation as Sweden’s foreign minister, Wallström announced that Sweden would not ratify the TPNW but would remain an observer in meetings of state parties. After this, and in line with the Finnish pragmatic approach, Swedish disarmament policy centred around initiatives aimed to strengthen the NPT, such as the Stockholm Initiative (Jonter and Rosengren, 2024). Representatives of the left (Gunnarsson et al, 2021) and green parties (Regeringskansliet, 2022) and some social democratic parliamentarians (Naraghi et al, 2021) continued to call on the government to ratify the TPNW. Conservatives, however, were pleased with the decision (see for example Wallmark et al, 2021).

Although the political left in Finland, which supported the TPNW in 2016–17, gained power in the parliamentary elections in 2019, the new government led by the Social Democrats did not make a U-turn regarding the TPNW. While the government recognised the role of the treaty in advancing nuclear disarmament, and intended to follow how it would be implemented, it did not aim to sign the treaty (Finnish Government, 2019). Despite strong pleas by Finnish ICAN (Juva and Montonen,

2019) and MPs from the Social Democratic Party, including former Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja (see Heinäluoma and Tuomioja, 2020), urging the Social Democrat-led government to follow the anti-nuclear sentiment among the public and sign the TPNW as a “brave pioneer”; no policy change occurred. Instead, the prevailing narrative of virtuous pragmatism within the existing NPT framework suppressed the nascent politicisation of the issue.

By the end of the decade, this had led to the naturalisation of disarmament gradualism, thereby reducing discursive space for idealistic reimagining of the existing nuclear order. In 2022, Sanna Marin’s Social Democrat-led government joined the first meeting of state parties for the TPNW as an observer. The following national conservative government, led by the National Coalition Party, reversed this decision in 2023. According to the new government, the TPNW was at odds with Finland’s responsibilities as a newcomer in NATO and the pragmatic approach prevailed. The dominance of the virtue of pragmatism narrative over time, in both Finland and Sweden, meant that the political-moral dimensions of nuclear disarmament, namely that the TPNW could reinforce the norm or stigma against nuclear weapons, was not prioritised. By advocating for a pragmatic and rational path forward as the only viable option, alternatives were marginalised and dismissed as idealistic, irrational, and impossible. Hence, the pragmatic approach contributed to depoliticising the issue.

Narrative 2. The necessity of extended (nuclear) deterrence

Russia’s full-fledged attempt to invade Ukraine in February 2022 was a genuine game changer for Finnish and Swedish security policy. Before this, the Social Democrats in Sweden maintained that the non-aligned policy served Swedish security interests well (see for example Linde, 2022). Nevertheless, the post-Cold War period was marked by increased transatlantic military cooperation and integration in both Finland and Sweden (Jonter and Rosengren, 2024). In Sweden, advocacy for NATO membership intensified after Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Hagström, 2021). However, prior to the full-scale invasion in 2022, the nuclear dimension of NATO was often used as an argument for continued non-alignment. For example, in 2018, Foreign Minister Wallström (2019) said: “It is a fact that [conservatives] want to join NATO, and NATO is based upon nuclear deterrence. You want to sit under a nuclear weapon umbrella. We, on the other hand, continue to support military non-alignment”. The green and the left parties agreed (Utrikesutskottet, 2022). Support for nuclear disarmament, and resistance towards extended nuclear deterrence, were central in the advocacy for sustained non-alignment in Sweden.

In Finland, perceptions of NATO as a nuclear alliance and the perceived value of extended nuclear deterrence were central features of decision-making on the matter. Finland’s official strategic documents on foreign and security policy started to broaden the understanding of deterrence from a purely national standpoint from the early 2010s onwards, after Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Around this time, Finland gradually deepened its cooperation and interoperability with NATO and other key partners such as the Nordic countries, the US, and the UK. This line of policy enjoyed wide parliamentary and public support (Pesu, 2022) and perceptions of Russia as a threat was a key feature thereof. A 2016 white paper described Russian aggression and open hostility towards the existing security order as the most significant security challenge for regional stability and emphasised the stabilising role of NATO and the US military presence in the Baltic Sea region (Prime Minister’s Office, 2016, pp. 13–15). Hence, threat perceptions related to Russia did not change overnight in 2022 when public support for NATO membership in Finland soared (cf. Vicente, Alkiş and Maksymenko, 2023, pp. 232–233). Putin’s ultimatum in December 2021, demanding legal guarantees by the US to prevent further NATO enlargement, challenged a key tenet

in the Finnish foreign policy doctrine, that is, the aspiration of maximising one's freedom of action (Pesu and Iso-Markku, 2024, p. 583). This paved the way for the naturalisation of extended nuclear deterrence in Finnish foreign policy narratives in 2022.

“Western” belonging

In the post-Cold War period, and alongside strengthened European and transatlantic military integration and cooperation, both Finnish and Swedish identity was increasingly associated with notions of “Western” belonging (Jonter and Rosengren, 2024). Immediately after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ulf Kristersson, leader of the conservative opposition party in Sweden, proclaimed: “No one doubts for a second where we belong” (Svenska Dagbladet, 2022). Media communicated similar messages, arguing, for example, that “Sweden simply belongs in the Western community of democracies, the ones that are members of NATO” (Dagens Nyheter, 2022a). In such narratives, joining NATO would confirm Sweden's assumed “natural” belonging to the “free world” (Expressen, 2022). Notions of natural belonging contributed to the naturalisation of NATO membership and was contrasted with Putin's Russia: “The choice is simple when choosing between an authoritarian and aggressive Russia, which defends the right of the strong to conquer smaller countries, and the democratic world, which defends the European security order and international law” (Jerneck, 2022). Through such representations, the adversary of “the West”, that is Russia, was demonised and attributed with threatening and aggressive characteristics (Eduards et al, 2023, p. 48).

Narratives about “Western” belonging also made it possible to renegotiate the meaning of international solidarity. During the Cold War, Swedish neutrality policy was associated with the work for decolonisation, development and third world solidarity (Agius, 2006). However, NATO advocates reimagined solidarity as constituting European and transatlantic defence cooperation “where friendship is deepened, and alliances get closer together – and gain new members” (Dagens Nyheter, 2022c). Solidarity was described as a “key principle” for the NATO alliance, and Sweden should be “proud” to contribute to the defence of its “natural” allies (Dagens Nyheter, 2022d). NATO allies were described as friendly and helpful “neighbours” (Dagens Nyheter, 2022b), alignment was equated with friendship, and NATO membership was described as “coming home” (Arvidsson, 2022). In such representations where familial imageries were used to describe Sweden's relationship with NATO, membership was described as a familial duty, as doing the right thing for members of one's family. The opposite – remaining non-aligned – was associated with negligence, disloyalty, or even cowardice. Such narratives contributed to naturalising Sweden's relationship with NATO and thereby depoliticising the nuclear dimension of NATO membership.

Notions of “Western” belonging, or of taking one final step to join the “Western value community”, were not that prominent in Finland (see also Särkkä, 2023, p. 68). In fact, perceptions of NATO as a homogenous value community were even challenged at times in Finnish parliamentary debates in 2022. The consensus on NATO membership was rather based on narratives about harsh military-political realities and the need to fill the perceived “deterrence deficit” accentuated by Russia's reckless coercive language on nuclear weapons (see also Forsberg, 2023b, p. 47). Thus, and perhaps a bit paradoxically, rejecting the policy of networked military alignment – which gradually replaced Finland's policy of non-alignment in the early 2010s (Pesu, 2022) – for formal alliance commitments was understood to increase Finland's freedom of action in a radically shifted security environment.

This was supported by the widely shared perception that it was impossible to continue the long tradition of pragmatic relations with Russia. Remaining outside NATO was considered to limit Finland's freedom of action (Linnainmäki, 2023, pp. 60–61). Since Finland had highlighted the

stabilising factors of NATO and the US military presence in the Baltic Sea region since 2016, there was a sense of continuity regarding perceptions of deterrence. This paved the way for a change from the rather idiosyncratic conceptions of national deterrence that were now explicitly supplemented with more interdependent conceptions of (extended nuclear) deterrence.

The deterrence deficit

In early April 2022, both Prime Minister Sanna Marin and President Sauli Niinistö argued that Finland would be less secure without the preventive effect of NATO's (extended) nuclear deterrence capability (Särkkä, 2022; Ristamäki and Nurmi, 2022). The leading Finnish news outlet, *Helsingin Sanomat* (2022), which had been advocating for NATO membership since the mid-2000s, claimed that Europe's deterrence was not credible without US commitment. The same message was repeated by the Foreign Affairs Committee (2022) in May 2022. Patching up the 'deterrence deficit' with NATO security guarantees, ultimately based on US extended nuclear deterrence, was generally deemed as more a necessity than a virtue.

As Pesu and Iso-Markku (2023, pp. 582–585) point out, perceptions of a “deterrence deficit” in Finland was not solely about (the lack of) extended nuclear deterrence. It was primarily built upon Russia's increased willingness to accept significant risks in using conventional military force. The emphasis on national (conventional) deterrence has deep and rather idiosyncratic historical roots in Finland (Rainio-Niemi, 2014). Key features here have been the citizens' will to defend the country, the importance of societal resilience as a kind of ‘soft deterrent’, and the policy of mandatory conscription for the male population, something that has been kept in place throughout the post-Cold War years. Swedish security policy has also relied on national military capability and notions of conventional deterrence. While strongly associated with perceptions of a peaceful national Self, the idea behind the Swedish Cold War armed neutrality policy was that mandatory male conscription, comparably large investments in the national armed forces, and a strong national arms industry would convince adversaries that the military costs of attacking Sweden would simply be too high to be worthwhile (Rosengren, 2020). While mandatory conscription was replaced with a voluntary conscription policy in 2010, it was reintroduced in 2017 (Strand, 2019).

In the Swedish NATO debate, however, critique was repeatedly directed at the assumed “bad” state of Swedish protection capabilities. For example, a former Supreme Commander, the highest ranked officer in the Swedish Armed Forces, argued: “The strong defense that was supposed to back up non-alignment and neutrality was dismantled without debate about its security political implications. The responsibility for this must be a heavy burden” (Wiktorin, 2022). Furthermore, the neutrality policy was represented as a myth, as a nostalgic and hypocritical social democrat delusion about neutrality during the Cold War. The argument was that neutrality was mere chimera, that Sweden was never de facto neutral due to secret relations with the US (Dagens Nyheter, 2018b). The perceived double standards of Swedish historical neutrality made it appear as shameful (Dagens Nyheter, 2017a, see also Dahl, 2017). The neutrality myth narrative led conservatives to conclude that joining NATO would not constitute a break from Swedish historical policy. On the contrary, it would be a sign of continuity, and would constitute a break from a shameful and hypocritical policy of the past.

While Sweden's historical neutrality policy was represented as a shameful myth, Finland's civilian and military planning was described as an ideal for Sweden to follow. While security policy priorities have been rather similar in Finland and Sweden in the post-Cold War era, one key difference is that Finland maintained its doctrine of total defence (amalgamated with the doctrine of comprehensive security in the early 2000s) and mandatory conscription for men in the post-Cold War period (Hyvönen and

Juntunen, 2020, pp. 163–164). Finland also kept the option to apply for NATO membership open. This was picked up by conservative parliamentarians in Sweden who argued that “the Finnish stand is both understandable and rational” (Jonsson, 2017). As opposed to Swedes, who were represented as damaged by Sweden’s long historical peace (Andersson, 2018, see also Eduards et al, 2023), Finland’s historical war experience with the Soviet Union during the Second World War was said to make them better prepared for the contemporary security situation (Dagens Nyheter, 2022e; 2022f). In various ways, Finland was described as a rational and pragmatic ideal for Sweden to follow (Dagens Nyheter, 2022h).

The comparison between Finland and Sweden also entailed bodily elements. “Finland is Sweden for grown-ups” was a repeated phrase in *Dagens Nyheter* (2022g; 2022f). Finland’s “military and civilian preparedness, ability to take care of itself, and not, as a child, depend on others” was contrasted with Sweden, in need of “a hand to hold onto” (Dagens Nyheter, 2022g). The historic colonial relationship between the two Nordic neighbours was also used to reimagine Finland as a ruler of Sweden in the present: “During hundreds of years, Finland was ruled from Stockholm. This spring Sweden is ruled from Helsinki” (Barth-Kron, 2022). Such representations put Sweden in a passive position with the body of a child compared to its grown-up Finnish counterpart. When Finland announced its decision to apply for NATO membership, it was perceived as impossible for Sweden to choose a different path. Representations of Finland as a grown-up role model for Sweden to follow thus contributed to rule out alternatives to joining NATO and thereby depoliticising NATO alignment.

The deterrence/disarmament nexus

In Sweden, narratives about neutrality as a myth also made it possible to argue that extended nuclear deterrence was, in fact, a historical continuity. For example, in 2017, an editorial in *Dagens Nyheter* (2017b) stated: “Neutrality was always a myth, the US had our backs after the Second World War and held its nuclear umbrella over us”. The argument was that Sweden had relied on extended nuclear deterrence all along. Furthermore, hypocrisy was argued to mark Swedish historical disarmament ambitions: “It is a typical illustration of how Sweden debates nuclear weapons: loudly demanding a nuclear ban and beautiful speech about disarmament – from our safe position under the US nuclear weapons umbrella” (Expressen, 2021). Since extended nuclear deterrence was perceived as a long-term continuity, disarmament ambitions were discredited. Narratives about disarmament as a hypocritical myth contributed to naturalising the nuclear dimension of NATO membership in Sweden, and thus contributed to depoliticisation.

While disarmament was described as a hypocritical myth in Sweden, the government maintained that nuclear disarmament remained a policy priority, regardless of NATO membership. When Sweden’s conservative foreign minister Tobias Billström (2024) presented Swedish foreign policy priorities after the approval of Sweden’s NATO application in March 2024, he said: “Sweden stands behind NATO’s strategic deterrence, and will remain a strong voice for arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation”. Similarly, the Finnish Foreign Affairs Committee (2022) insisted that Finland would keep its strong profile in nuclear disarmament diplomacy “without compromising NATO’s nuclear deterrence”.

Such arguments recurred in Finnish parliamentary debates during spring 2022. Interestingly, in Finland, it was not Sweden but Norway that was used as the main analogy to deliberate policy options under the new circumstances. MPs especially on the political left and centre in Finland referred to the “Norwegian model” – the political commitment of not allowing nuclear weapons on its soil in peacetime – as an ideal for Finland (Finnish Parliament 2022a; 2022b). This approach

was described as compatible with Finland's *Nuclear Energy Act* (1987) which prohibits the import, manufacture, possession, and detonation of nuclear explosives in Finland. Hence, both Finland and Sweden combined a policy line consisting of deterrence optimism and disarmament pragmatism, where (extended) nuclear deterrence optimism was amalgamated with the already internalised narrative of disarmament pragmatism amid the NATO debate. That said, both Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership without any preconditions, that is, with full rights and obligations.

Discussion

Our comparison of debates about nuclear weapons, disarmament and extended nuclear deterrence has revealed that the narrative of disarmament pragmatism prevailed in both Finland and Sweden. While this approach was associated with rationality and reason, we maintain that “appeals to a non-ideological, ‘practical’ nuclear politics are ideological statements par excellence” (Egeland, 2021, p. 209). At the outset, the pragmatic stance adopted by Sipilä's government in Finland was based on the conception that the TPNW was incompatible with the NPT regime. Importantly, this stance was not based on legal reasoning, at least not in the beginning (cf. Egeland et al., 2018), but instead on the perceived need to maintain the NPT regime as the cornerstone of the existing global nuclear order.

In Finland, the pragmatist narrative was also justified through the emphasis of Finland's historical disarmament gradualism and its bridge-building role, going back to the 1960s (see Juntunen, 2023). Over time, Sweden endorsed Finland's pragmatic approach. This led to a policy line which naturalised the existing nuclear order through emphasis on its compatibility with certain historically stratified small state virtues. These were based on the idea of reducing the sense of political contingency by emphasising the pragmatist virtue of approaching policy areas, such as disarmament, as a gradual or incremental process that should aim for practical (measurable) outcomes (on negating or removing contingency from politics, see e.g. Jenkins, 2011, p. 160; Wiesner, 2019, pp. 256–257). This was assumed to happen without norm entrepreneurship and/or paradigm change. As an interesting amalgamation of principled small state realism with a touch of great-power centric liberal ideals, especially the emphasis on the responsibility of the leading nuclear powers in advancing disarmament, this ethos anchored Finland and Sweden's positions in the hegemonic camp of the global nuclear order, that is the nuclear weapon states and their allies (cf. e.g. Ritchie, 2019; 2022; Egeland, 2021, p. 209).

The reasoning behind downplaying the political agency of more progressive or even radical initiatives, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, implies a certain level of depoliticisation. As Wood (2015, p. 3) points out, the removal of political agency is a typical discursive move that drives the process of depoliticisation. In Finland, the decision to not support the TPNW was justified by downplaying Finland's agency in disarmament matters, or, for that matter, the agency of all non-nuclear weapon states. On the other hand, this was done indirectly by emphasising the agency and responsibility of the recognised nuclear weapon states and, more importantly, recognising the limited spaces small states had to manoeuvre at the margins of the system. In Sweden, representations of continued military cooperation with the US as fundamentally necessary for Swedish security, and of the TPNW as a threat to such future relations, contributed to depoliticising the choice not to support it.

Together with the threat to regional security posed by an increasingly revisionist nuclear power relying on open nuclear coercion (see Arndt, Horowitz and Onderco, 2023), and the subsequent perception of a ‘deterrence deficit’ in Finland and Sweden, the pragmatic approach to disarmament led to the legitimisation of the hierarchically structured global nuclear order (cf. Ritchie, 2019). It was portrayed as an insurmountable, almost ahistorical or irreversible element in international politics,

but in a way that also left some agency for small states to fine-tune or manage the existing order from the margins of the system. This can be understood as a way of nurturing the system by avoiding a paradigm shift, something that might have increased unpredictability at a systemic level and diffused political agency within the system even further. It was based on the conscious narrowing down of one's own agency, at least when understood in terms of systemic transformation and norm entrepreneurship. This move was relational in a sense, as it accentuated the political agency of the leading nuclear powers.

The prevailing disarmament pragmatism narrative also had consequences for how nuclear issues were debated in both Finland and Sweden in relation to NATO membership. The sense of national 'deterrence deficit' shared by the political elite in Finland and central in Swedish parliamentary and media debates supported the discursive landscape in which the already naturalised disarmament pragmatism seemed to be almost a natural fit. In Sweden, representations of the historical neutrality policy – and in effect nuclear disarmament advocacy – as a myth associated with hypocrisy and shame made it possible to represent NATO alignment, and in effect reliance on extended nuclear deterrence, as both a historical continuity and the only reasonable and brave way forward. Hence, narratives about the neutrality myth contributed to naturalising both the choice not to join the TPNW and to join NATO.

The nuclear dimension of NATO membership was thereby depoliticised during the processes that led the Finnish and Swedish governments to apply for NATO membership together in May 2022. That said, it is noteworthy that the nuclear dimension has become re-politicised in both countries since the realisation of their NATO memberships. For instance, during the second round of Finland's presidential elections in early 2024, national policy on nuclear weapons, more specifically the question of whether to allow the transit of nuclear weapons through Finland's territory, emerged as a central issue distinguishing the leading candidates Alexander Stubb (elected president) and Pekka Haavisto (Nalbantoglu, Herlin and Pekonen, 2024). Subsequently, in spring 2024, both the Swedish and Finnish prime ministers took stances on their countries' guidelines on nuclear weapons policy (Alentola, 2024; Shanwell, 2024). Although the scope of this article ends in spring 2022, the nascent re-politicisation of nuclear weapons policy after NATO membership offers a fruitful topic for further research – a topic which could also be examined from the perspective of internal decision-making dynamics when new members integrate into military alliances.

Furthermore, and especially in Sweden, identity was central in debates about both the TPNW and NATO. Nuclear deterrence was incorporated into notions of "Western" belonging, where the "Western" practice of extended nuclear deterrence was perceived as a logical continuum of developments over time. Familial imageries about Sweden's intimate relationship with NATO and its allies contributed to naturalising Sweden's belonging in the alliance. Hence, in debates about both the TPNW and NATO, extended nuclear deterrence practices were integrated into understandings of what belonging to "the West" entailed. Moreover, what we perceive as "Nordic relationality" was also central in both Finland and Sweden. Instead of looking towards Sweden as the significant other in nuclear weapons and disarmament diplomacy, as Finland used to do in the Cold War era, it was Norway that was presented as a key point of reference in Finland. The Norwegian example served as an analogy or discursive-relational instrument used to reconcile the increased emphasis on extended nuclear deterrence with continuity in disarmament pragmatism. Sweden, on the other hand, made a model of Finland's pragmatic approach and its military and civilian preparedness.

In conclusion, our comparative analysis has revealed how depoliticising narratives, alongside drastic changes in the regional security environment, made joining a nuclear alliance possible in

two national contexts marked by historical opposition towards nuclear weapons. Further analysis of continuities and changes over a longer period, including the role of identity and power in nuclear policies and about experiences beyond the Nordic region, would shed additional light on some of the topics discussed in this article.

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