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Finland's international defence and security cooperation as a shelter-seeking strategy in the views of the Finnish MPs in the era of great power competition

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Abstract

Great power politics and current developments of multipolarity challenge the rules-based order and international environment in which small states, including Finland, operate. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Finland has joined NATO and strengthened its bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation. In this article, we look at international defence and security cooperation as a shelter-seeking strategy. The article relies on original interview data (N=22) of the members of the Finnish parliament (2019-2023 term), which will be examined through theoretically-oriented qualitative content analysis focusing on international cooperation from the perspective of shelter theory. The study shows that shelter-seeking takes place in both bi- and multilateral manners, but there are significant differences in costs and benefits and drivers behind shelter-seeking.

Keywords

Finland, defence and security politics, small state, shelter theory, international cooperation, NATO membership

Introduction

“In the future, Finland’s defense policy will be based on three pillars: a strong national defense capability that is continuously developed, deepening international defense cooperation, and NATO membership. Of these, I highlight international defense cooperation as particularly important, as it must be further intensified in the coming years.” (Antti Häkkinen 139/2022 vp)

Finland’s NATO membership since 2023 has been explained as a response to the changing security environment after Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2022 (see Government of Finland report on NATO membership, 2022; Forsberg, 2023b). Already, the Government’s policy document on foreign and security policy adopted by the parliament in 2020 noticed the role of great power competition and the potential effect of global challenges: “The operating environment of Finnish foreign and security policy” was seen as being “in an intense state of flux” (Finnish Government, 2020, p. 11).

While the developments described above have intensified the discussions of foreign and security politics amid the changing circumstances, international cooperation on defence and security politics has traditionally been considered important in Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2015). Especially the relations with the Nordics and in particular with Sweden (Ojanen and Raunio, 2018; Salenius-Pasternak and Vanhanen, 2020), as well as the EU (Government of Finland, 2024) and the deepening cooperation with the United States since 2016 (Statement of intent between the Department of Defense of the United States of America and the Ministry on Defence of the Republic of Finland, 2016; Montonen, 2017) have been in the focus of cooperation. With all forms of international cooperation, including bi- and multilateral cooperation, Finland has attempted to improve its security and build a network of cooperation with states based on shared interests and identities.

International cooperation represents an increasingly important field of activity to support a previously more European Union-focused framework of strengthening Finland’s international position and security. This is also visible in how the revision of legislation is being approached in Finland vis-à-vis foreign and security policy. For instance, in 2022, then the Prime Minister of Finland, Sanna Marin (PTK 56/2022 vp), noticed how Finland’s legislation is mainly built up by the thought of national defence but that there had been recent efforts to develop the legislation so that it enables both giving and receiving international aid, and other forms of strengthening international cooperation (see also Government’s report on NATO membership, 2022, p. 4) without an explicit source of aid defined. Similarly, Finland’s NATO membership since 2023, when debated in 2022 in the Finnish Parliament, was not considered to rule out other forms of international defence cooperation but rather was seen as a development of a longer trend of increasing cooperation that should be continued and strengthened (Kaarkoski et al., 2024).

Current scholarship on Finnish foreign and security policy often highlights its connections to different forms of international cooperation and to the role Finland wants to pursue or how it pursues foreign policy mostly in a multilateral framework (e.g., Brommesson, 2022; Siddi et al., 2022; Winnerstig, 2014; Braichevska et al., 2024; Forsberg, 2013), but also to some extent in a more bilateral approach where Finland’s foreign policy is connected to other countries’ foreign policy such as Sweden’s (Wieslander, 2019; Ojanen and Raunio, 2018; Salenius-Pasternak and Vanhanen, 2020). Finland’s alliance policy is currently understudied due to the novel nature of Finland being a member of an alliance, but some examples shed light on historical (Jonas, 2012) and more current-day questions (Pesu and Iso-Markku, 2022).

Recently, Finland's NATO membership has been a focus of many studies. The membership has been seen both as a logical continuation of the actions Finland has adopted over the years (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023), whereas others have seen it as a more "dramatic change" (Ålander and Pihlajanmaa, 2025). For Forsberg (2023a), the change was "swift and comprehensive." Sinkkonen and Pesu (2025) argue that instead of having a long-term grand strategy, Finland has been adjusting its security constellation in response to shifting external environment and threat perceptions. The rationale behind the change of policy from neutral to military non-alignment (e.g., Pakkasvirta and Tuominen, 2024) and finally NATO membership and relevant dynamics (Forsberg, 2024; 2023a; Pesu and Iso-Markku, 2024) have already been studied quite extensively.

However, we perceive a research gap in understanding related to Finland's foreign and security policy thinking towards international cooperation more generally, especially in the context of why cooperation is being sought after and what implications it might have. In this article, we aim to add more insights to the existing scholarship and provide a more nuanced view of the Finnish international defence and security cooperation with two means: firstly, by focusing on the perceptions of Finnish Members of Parliament in the electoral term (2019-2023) and secondly, by relying on small state security strategies and especially shelter theory to reflect Finland's policy of cooperation. Our research question is how Members of Parliament perceived international cooperation, and we use this to discuss how shelter as a foreign and security policy question is being considered among the Finnish political elite in the parliament.

A recent article by Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal (2023, p. 195) considered that "Finland's ambition to join NATO should be understood as a continuation of its shelter-seeking strategy from the beginning of the Cold War." Furthermore, Kulali Martin (2024) took a similar view. This article will take this argument as a starting point and examine the Finnish MPs' views on international defence and security cooperation in the previous electoral term of 2019-2023 by focusing on cooperation in unilateral, bilateral and multilateral manners. While the presented study concerns Finland, as studies on small states often focus on specific countries, it will provide a case study of shelter-seeking in practice, thus contributing to the literature on small states and shelter theory. Shelter theory has become a prominent "analytical tool" in small states studies to understand small state foreign policy (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023), and especially to explain small Western states' alliance options (Bailes et al., 2016) and is thus useful for this article's aim to analyse political elites' views on international cooperation. Finland has been seen as an interesting example of a small state "adopting hiding, shelter-seeking and hedging strategies in a geopolitically challenging neighbourhood" (Jokela, 2023, p. 618).

The article is divided into the following sections. After the introduction, the theory part of the article builds a small state perspective on changing security and defence environment and international cooperation. Next, shelter theory is explained as the main theoretical framework to enable the examination of the different dynamics and drivers behind the responses, and in this case, the need to strengthen international cooperation in defence and security policy, both in bi- and multilateral manner. The following section focuses on the research design, including data and methods, followed by a section on empirical examination of the parliamentarians' view of the issue, accompanied by a discussion on the findings related to previous literature on shelter theory. In the final section, concluding remarks are provided.

International defence and security cooperation from a small state perspective

For this article's approach, there are three relevant perspectives for small state foreign policy in international cooperation. Firstly, small states have an agency in foreign and security policy. The ability of a state to manoeuvre between countries and organisations for preferred cooperation is particularly important for small states, for which the idea has been that they are less capable of having a say to their own environment. Therefore, they would be more likely to present it as being in small states' interest to be part of formal alliances and institutional cooperation to ensure predictability and to reduce uncertainty, in addition to strengthening the international institutions that provide a platform through which they mediate their interests (Haugevik and Rieker, 2017). Thus, despite being a small state, small states also have agency in international relations and a change in foreign policy raises questions about the extent of such change and the underlying contextual assumptions affecting the change and its depth. Shelter-seeking indeed expects alignment and taking an active stance in respect to international organisations and/or greater powers (Jokela, 2023).

Secondly, the agency of small state foreign policy is being shaped by external, more structural issues of international relations. Small states navigate a shifting international order that will impact their immediate and long-term security (Briffa and Högenauer, 2025, p. 6). In the context of various threats to small states, the question of alliance policy becomes significant, as they are foreign policy means for states to increase security and to avoid conflicts (Reiter, 2006).

Thirdly, there are internal, or domestic, drivers that help to explain foreign policy orienting toward cooperation. When Saxi (2019) examined Nordic defence cooperation, he argued that it has at times been either threat-driven or internally driven. For example, the reason for non-aligned Finland to join the Norwegian Swedish initiative in 2008 was explained by the challenges it faced in terms of defence economy (ibid., p. 664) pinpointing an internally driven cooperation, whereas the recent developments could be considered to be more threat-driven cooperation.

Furthermore, to highlight the importance of domestic drivers for previous and future decision-making, foreign policy tends to also link to the state of domestic decision-making (see Fearon, 1998; Kaarbo, 2015), where domestic factors may shape national foreign policy. For instance, the role of consensus-seeking often provides an effective way for small states to seek national cohesion and to supplement majority decision-making (Katzenstein, 2006, pp. 209-210).

Shelter theory as a small state coping strategy

Small states' actions that seek to overcome their vulnerabilities in the international system have been described as balancing or bandwagoning, illustrating small states' strategies towards intergovernmental institutions, including NATO (Bailes and Thorhallsson, 2013). While there are several benefits of international cooperation and alliance formation, there are also many related "costs" as recognised in the previous small state literature (e.g., Pedersen, 2023). Smaller states, however, usually seek shelter either from states or organisations to mitigate the structural weakness related to their smallness (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023).

In the previous literature, it has been noticed that Finland's orientation to the West has intensified gradually since the 1990s, particularly in connection to Russia's actions in Crimea in 2014 and the attack on Eastern Ukraine later that year (Brommesson et al., 2023). The West here refers to specific institutions and identity, rather than to geographical location. Before the "era of alliance" since 2023,

Finland was aligning with the Western defence system (Sinkkonen and Pesu, 2025). Brommesson et al. (2023) argue that the move to the “West” was confirmed by the Finnish political elite and seen as “deliberate,” even though the reorientation has often been conducted “with caution.” However, already with the EU membership in 1995, Finland had become integrated into the European security structures and had become a ‘devoted European’, desiring a place at the core of EU decision-making. The year earlier, in 1994, Finland had also joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace Programme, illustrating a need to also integrate into security structures in the West (Ojanen, 2005, p. 407). For many, Finland’s NATO membership has been seen as the final stage of alignment or confirmation of orientation towards the West (Vogt, 2023, p. 45). According to Vogt (2023, p. 51), the Finnish NATO membership was not, however, mainly determined by the identity-based reasoning but because the hard-security concerns sustained.

Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal (2023) have argued that Finland has historically sought economic, military and societal shelter from the Western organisations, but due to geopolitical reasons, it has only rarely been able to fully adopt desired shelter arrangements, especially in the domain of military security, to have military protection. In the aftermath of the Cold War, Finnish security and foreign policy went through some changes, one of them being the replacement of neutrality with military non-alignment, with Finland committing to the EU’s common security and defence politics and participation in the EU battle groups and crisis operations (Palosaari, 2013, p. 357). This highlighted the continued importance placed on international cooperation.

Finland is an example of a small state that has been making domestic decisions to maintain security because of the disadvantages related to the factors that usually help in times of conflict. Maintaining conscription is one example of small states’ domestic actions while having great powers situated next to them. Domestic efforts are, however, usually combined with alliances, because of the small states’ capabilities for achieving “comprehensive security” (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023, p. 197).

Shelter-seeking can be understood in terms of economic, societal, and political. In this article, our focus is on political shelter-seeking both in bi- and multilateral manners, as will be discussed in detail in the following method section.

MP interviews as data

Foreign and security politics are usually government-led and centred in the executive branch of the Government, Finland being no exception in this regard. Furthermore, from a conceptual perspective, Finnish foreign, security and defence policies are typically presented as intertwined, and foreign and security policy are usually discussed together, supported by defence policy. These areas of policy-making all contribute to the decision-making process in which national goals are (i) to safeguard Finland’s independence and territorial integrity, (ii) to avoid becoming involved in a military conflict, and (iii) to improve the security and well-being of the people of Finland (Finnish Government, 2024, p. 8). What is important to notice is that the idea of consensus-building is an integral part of decision-making in Finland over foreign and security politics (see Forsberg, 2024), and it has been a defining feature of Finland’s foreign and security policy choices (see, e.g., Raunio, 2021), also underlining the need to have public discussion, including the parliament.

The previous parliament (2019-2023) was formed on the basis of a rainbow government, in which the parliamentary majority was held by the Social Democrats, the Green Party, the Swedish People’s Party of Finland, the Centre Party and the Left Alliance. They formed the government, and the opposition consisted mostly of two major parties, the National Coalition Party and the Finns Party. During the

previous government, the Russian invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 changed the foreign and security policy environment in which Finland was operating, leading to the NATO membership decision-making process. The process was parliamentarised to enable the building of a broad parliamentary consensus on the membership. Finnish foreign and security policy leadership centres on, by constitutional design, the President of the Republic and the government led by the Prime Minister, but they often base their views on parliamentarily accepted foreign and security policy (Limnell, 2008; 2009). By focusing on examining the views of the parliamentarians, we aim to catch the different nuances in the elite discourse outside the executive-dominated foreign and security policy discourse and illustrate the different aspects of shelter and its rationale, motives and costs.

This article relies on semi-structured interviews of the Finnish members of parliament (electoral term 2019-2023) conducted between 2023-2025 (N=22), see Appendix 2. The number of interviewees represent 11% of the potential pool of interviewees. The interviews were conducted as part of the project examining Finnish defence policy decision-making from a perspective of deliberative democracy (Häkkinen et al., n.d.). The interviewees, 16 men and 6 women with varying levels of experience, represented eight of the ten Finnish parliamentary parties, thus providing a comprehensive view. Most of the interviews were conducted online, and the interviewees were given an opportunity to see the questions beforehand. Interviewees represented seven out of 13 electoral districts. The interviews were made on the record and are thus not anonymised; they are referenced in the article only by the interview number, because the reporting of the results focuses on qualitative content analysis of the entire interview data and quotations are mainly used to give representative examples of the findings.

International cooperation and especially NATO membership have also been extensively discussed in the Finnish parliament Eduskunta, for example, in respect to the Government's reports on the changed security environment and NATO membership and previous studies have already benefited from these materials (e.g. Kaarkoski et al., 2024; Immonen, 2024). The focus of this article is primarily on the interview data and builds upon the idea that by selecting a number of good informants, we can have an understanding of the views and beliefs of the parliamentarians. Previous research has pointed out how Finnish political party groups are both cohesive and disciplined, making MPs act as agents of their parties rather than independent actors (Aula and Raunio, 2022). For example, only the Left Alliance was divided over the NATO membership acceptance voting in March 2023, whereas one of the Finns party members abstained from voting. While the idea of the Finnish consensus-oriented policy-making culture could be supported by looking at discussions among the political elite more broadly, the interview data provided a rather comprehensive view of the parliamentarians in terms of expertise, parties and committee memberships as explained above.

Three of the interview questions are especially important from this article's perspective. The first one focused more on the rationale for the discussions that the members of parliament may have regarding international cooperation (mainly with Sweden, the United States and the European Union). The other two questions concerned NATO membership. Firstly, how the membership and different NATO partners might be present in Finnish domestic discussions. Secondly, and more directly, how other countries' internal dynamics or NATO as an organisation could potentially influence the Finnish parliamentary decision-making on how discussions can be carried out in the context of Finland's NATO membership. While the questions were not directly about shelter, they provided sufficient materials for the analysis. The questions overall included many aspects of Finnish foreign, security and defence policy decision-making, and interviewees often used other questions to comment further on international questions and to reflect on Finland's position in the world and, in particular, in the international system.

The interview data have been transcribed with the help of two companies providing transcription services, Annanpura Oy and Tutkimustie Oy, and analysed through qualitative analysis (see Appendix 1). Qualitative data analysis is commonly used to examine interview data (see e.g. Roulston, 2022). We will rely on content analysis that is theoretically oriented in terms of defining the codes, which will be explained in the following section.

Theory-oriented qualitative content analysis as a method

The aim of the study is to explore perceptions of Finnish Members of Parliament in the parliamentary session of 2019-2023 towards international cooperation, and especially focus on perceptions towards multilateralism, bilateralism and unilateralism with the premise that the underlying motive behind foreign policy thinking is a small state's interest to maximise its international position by either focusing on itself or its international cooperation.

In this approach, multilateralism is understood in the context of Ruggie (1992) as cooperation between three or more countries. Bilateralism stems from Finland's traditional focus on the Nordic and, above all, cooperation with Sweden (Ojanen and Raunio, 2018). On the other hand, unilateralism provides a potential perspective to incorporate a more long-term impact of foreign and security policy traditions to current-day thinking, as Finland has only gradually increased its international cooperation in foreign and security policy since its EU membership in the 1990s (Raunio, 2021).

Division of international cooperation into unilateralism, bilateralism and multilateralism created the basis for coding and was supplemented by two theoretical dimensions:

Firstly, the shelter theory in IR studies as advocated by Baldur Thorhallsson and his colleagues (e.g., 2008; 2023) to focus on small state foreign policy and shelter policy, a theme we estimated to be important for Members of Parliament due to a sense of change in the Finnish security environment in February 2022, an event encouraging political efforts to strengthen Finnish security vis-à-vis expanding Russia and weakened multilateral, rules-based international order in the Baltic in particular (Finnish Government, 2022a). This meant that Finland was ready to explore the possibilities of enhancing international shelter in a changing political environment, while its domestic capabilities to maintain security and defence were limited and already believed to be in good shape (Finnish Government, 2022b). As previously mentioned, shelter theory argues that small states seek political, economic, and societal shelter in their foreign and security policy. This is done to fulfil the state's needs regarding security and to mitigate the vulnerabilities inherent with the state's small size (Thorhallsson, 2018). Thorhallsson and Steinsson (2023) point out that political shelter is influenced by military power, diplomatic power, administrative capacity, and the quality of domestic political institutions. Furthermore, economic shelter is influenced by factors of market access and trade, as well as economic assistance during crises, and societal shelter is influenced by factors such as exposure to ideas and to competition between technologies, to name a few.

All in all, we perceived that there should be additional theoretical insights behind the coding: structural realism of inequality of small states and great powers (Vital, 1967; Mouritzen, 1991), institutional possibilities to amplify small state's foreign policy in discursive narrating foreign policy (Browning, 2006), the idea of norm entrepreneurship in which cooperation can be mutually beneficial (Ingebritsen, 2002; see also Thorhallsson, 2006), and the role of historical memory behind foreign policy (Wang, 2017).

Altogether we defined coding inspired by shelter theory suitable in the Finnish political context to focus on acknowledging political opportunity to take a new course in foreign policy, possibly in the face of a sense of pressure. In addition, the coding acknowledged that a revised policy to seek shelter

could include costs and be driven or influenced by factors such as history or domestic politics, the latter being shaped by the importance of unity in Finnish foreign policy. Furthermore, the idea of the Finnish political elite interested in shelter should also be reflected with the notion of whether shelter-seeking would be only one-sided, or would it include notions of what Finland could offer to different forms of cooperation with international partners. Following the example of the shelter theory, we devised a codebook that was based on the following labels for shelter: shelter as necessity, shelter as opportunity, shelter costs acknowledged, shelter as mutual benefit, historical justification and shelter as domestic political question.

Secondly, because of the study's focus on perceptions of interviewees, coding was utilised to draw attention to the role of political language. Thus, our approach noted this and the coding also focused on discursive framing of shelter searching, to follow Christopher S. Browning's (2006) work on small state foreign policy as discursive, and above all identity-focused activity, and political research's constructivist focus on the role of speaking and the use of discourses in political activity, also in the parliamentary context (e.g., Wiesner et al., 2017; Ilie, 2015).

Qualitative analysis typically includes both inductive and deductive reasoning, when researchers apply close reading of the data to gather the findings but simultaneously rely on theories from previous research to guide and to advance their analysis (Roulston, 2022). Codebook (Appendix 1) was revised with data-driven findings. Code was always given to a new issue emerging from interviews: thus, in interviews with the same issue being raised repeatedly, only the first occasion was coded. The focus of the coding was to concentrate on parliamentarians' views towards international cooperation and the seeking of shelter for Finland. Two researchers participated in the coding process, and it was done manually in the transcriptions. The whole interview data was included in the coding. The materials that were not about international cooperation were excluded from the analysis, and no new codes were formed in the analysis process. Claude.ai Opus 4.5 was utilised to help in drafting the first version of the codebook. The final codebook was prepared by the authors. In the following section, we will go through our core findings.

International cooperation as perceived by the parliamentarians

In the following table, the coding results are shown numerically. As we can see, unilateralism did not emerge as a theme in the examined data. Both forms of bi- and multilateral international cooperation gained several results, but multilateralism still stands out. There are, however, considerable differences within these forms of international cooperation and the rationale, motives, and costs of shelter. We will go through the findings in more detail below and raise selected, representative quotations from the data. The quotations have been translated by the authors.

Main code	Code	Results
Unilateralism	DIS-NEC	0
	DIS-OPP	0
	DIS-CST	0
	DIS-MUT	0
	DIS-HIS	0
	DIS-POL	0
Bilateralism	DIS-NEC	0
	DIS-OPP	4
	DIS-CST	3
	DIS-MUT	1
	DIS-HIS	4
	DIS-POL	2
Multilateralism	DIS-NEC	13
	DIS-OPP	8
	DIS-CST	20
	DIS-MUT	8
	DIS-HIS	9
	DIS-POL	9

Table 1: Coding results, based on unilateralism, bilateralism and multilateralism as the parent codes, followed by codes for shelter as necessity (NEC), opportunity (OPP), shelter costs (CST), mutual benefits (MUT), prior experiences (HIS) and domestic political drivers (POL). DIS refers to a discursive approach.

Unilateralism

The interviews did not include notions about unilateral positions; thus, rejecting the question of international cooperation altogether did not surface. When the interviews were carried out, Finland was already a member of NATO, and Members of Parliament probably perceived the situation following the already accepted policy without a stated interest in challenging it. Furthermore, unilateralism has usually been part of Finland’s traditional foreign and security policy on specific occasions, such as when it has chosen to treat a particular international treaty differently when the Cold War ended (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi, 2016).

Bilateralism

The coding did not specify bilateralism as a country-specific question, but the Nordics, and particularly cooperation with Sweden, has been considered important (e.g., Ojanen and Raunio, 2018). As Table 1 shows, the shelter as a necessity did not appear at all in this framework, which considerably differs from the multilateral framework in which shelter as a necessity appeared as the second most relevant theme. Similarly to the literature on Finland’s foreign and security policy after the Cold War (e.g., Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023), shelter was also seen from a historical perspective as strengthening Western alliances since the 1950s when the window of opportunity has been opened. (Interview 1)

The interviewees especially spoke about bilateral cooperation with Sweden (or Nordics in general), which was seen as “uncomplicated”, with historical traditions, shared identity and interests. One of the interviewees (no. 15) pointed out that shelter is most present in the Nordics and bilateral defence cooperation with Sweden. It has a long history and traditions.



The shelter here includes both countries and institutions, but mainly in the form of defence agreements and mutual understandings, because apart from NORDEFECO, there are really no other organisations of Nordic cooperation in terms of defence and security.

In terms of seeing shelter as a mutual benefit, Sweden was seen as the country most interested in supporting Finland's sovereignty, the other Nordics came second and then Europe (interview 2). The defence union between Sweden and Finland outside NATO was also seen as an option that would have been beneficial for both parties. Sweden has a lot of material capabilities that Finland lacks, and in terms of material capabilities, combining these two would be "match made in heaven" in addition to the common political interests (Interview 3). In the same interview, it was, however, also pointed out that this option of shelter could have been a viable option, but there was no opportunity to discuss it.

Another interviewee pointed out, however, that before NATO, there was no defence union between Sweden and Finland. The cooperation was seen as dynamic and formal, but not as a kind of cooperation that would require defending the other, which changed when both countries joined NATO. (Interview 5) The data from the previous parliament does not separately tackle the emerging complicated relationship with the US, but rather considers it as part of the NATO membership. However, it was also mentioned when highlighting shelter as an opportunity that "at the same time, it is worth taking all the support and help from the United States that Finland can have but not at any price" (Interview 3).

It was, however, also brought up how domestic drivers have an effect, one of the major ones being the search for consensus. After the major decision of Finland joining NATO had been made, differing opinions have started to emerge, for example, with respect to defence cooperation with the US (Interview 20).

The costs of shelter were also recognised in terms of bilateral cooperation. The role of the EU and how both the major and minor issues were handled through Brussels was brought up. At the same time, it was pointed out that it is not enough to go through Washington or Brussels but through all the relevant capitals. The meaning of bilateral relations for other countries was emphasised as well, if Finland is aiming to have relationships with those other than NATO members. (Interview 1)

The coding, as presented above, shows that the mutual benefits was not that significant in the bilateral framework. This can be explained, however, by the fact that it is built into the idea of bilateral cooperation. The domestic drivers also gathered fewer markings. Otherwise, shelter as an opportunity, related costs and prior experiences gathered rather similar results.

Multilateralism

The role of NATO dominated the interviews. It was mentioned in some interview questions, but the interviewees in general were interested in discussing the NATO context and also additional questions relating to the organisation. The European Union was also present both in questions and, therefore, in answers, and outside the framework of these two multilateral organisations, the interviewees made only occasional references to other forms of cooperation, such as the Nordic cooperation.

The interviews illustrate that the Members of Parliament broadly perceived multilateral cooperation as a matter of necessity for Finnish foreign and security policy and gave considerable attention to the costs associated with the multilateral cooperation. Necessity stemmed from Finland's precarious position resulting from the Russian invasion of its other neighbouring country Ukraine in February 2022.

For instance, Interview no. 18 referred to the loss of trust in the Russians from the perspective of stability, meaning that Finland had to react to the change: "that Russia's attack was considered very dramatic and something that removed the trust."

The change in the security environment (rather than being only a threat) was seen as surprising and quick, which then resulted in the rush to seek a membership of a defence alliance to secure against possible unpredictable Russian actions. Therefore, there were no other options than trying to counter that unpredictability (Interview 21).

The changed geopolitical situation also created an emotional challenge to respond to more long-term feelings of threat associated with Finland's geographical position as Russia's neighbour:

“all Finnish people have a subconscious fear of war stemming from generations back, due to our geopolitical situation, which was somewhat activated after Russia's attack on Ukraine. That was the reason behind the major distress for us, what happens to Finland.” (Interview 1)

Costs included challenges related to the functionality of the organisation, such as a lack of efficiency, but also to more problematic costs for Finnish traditions: for instance, Finland could feel compelled to participate in a military operation outside its immediate national interests. Furthermore, cooperation in the NATO context would mean cooperation with countries with different approaches to shared values than Finland currently has, and the same applied in the EU framework to a certain extent. However, the EU was more focused on other forms of cooperation, whereas NATO clearly represented the framework for questions of military-based security.

From the historical perspective, the question of other countries influencing the Finnish foreign and security policy was floated in some comments. Finland has a history of a great power influencing the Finnish international position in the international realm during ‘Finlandization’ in the Cold War period, and some interviewees felt that a similar situation could take place both in the NATO and EU frameworks. For instance, Interviewee no. 5 mentioned:

“[...] there can come some restrictions now whether we can and who can vocally criticise questions related to human rights, democracy or the principle of rule of law, whether in the US, Hungary, Turkey or our current allies. How much courage is there to criticise these? It can be that there will be a time of new-Finlandization, that we have allies with problems or even wrongdoings in these questions that I mentioned. [...] The same can also apply in the EU, that how much we criticise EU allies, to some extent Hungary. But what about Poland, in Poland there is now a change of government but before that. Our international obligations create certain loyalties and obligations of loyalties.” (Interview 5)

The multilateral framework very much emphasised the need to have shelter because of the changed security environment, but also the shelter costs were very much present. Here, the focus was clearly on institutions rather than specific countries, even when the costs are often related to asymmetric power relations and in our examined data, also the possible new-Finlandization. Furthermore, the coding revealed that sense of opportunity to strengthen Finnish position, shelter-seeking providing mutual benefits both for Finland and multilateral partners, historical explanations such as prior Finnish foreign and security policy of increasing cooperation and domestic political drivers such as positive party positions towards shelter (above all visible in NATO membership question) were rather evenly invoked in arguments.

Discussion

The utilisation of shelter theory to investigate the collected data succeeded in illustrating perceptions towards international cooperation on a bi- and multilateral basis, and the analysis revealed the Finnish emphasis towards multilateral cooperation, albeit with acknowledged costs associated to such form of cooperation, including challenges related to partners and their values and to the overall impact on

the freedom of Finnish decision-makers to speak and discuss freely. However, from the perspective of seeking consensus in foreign and security policy decision-making and the executive-led decision-making, a full sense of freedom from influence might be difficult to achieve in the first place in a parliamentary context. Our results engage with some issues raised by earlier research on shelter theory. Kulali Martin (2024) argues that the Finnish entry to NATO did reflect Thorhallsson's shelter theory's indicators and the sense of crisis in particular launching the entry process (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2018), and our insights illustrate a similar view of NATO membership being a key step in seeking shelter in a time of necessity, thus providing an alternative view to the argument that the public opinion affected the foreign policy decision-making significantly (Forsberg, 2024).

Outside the NATO context, Bailes et al. (2016) suggest that the price for shelter for a smaller partner cannot be higher than the gains of shelter. Our results do not indicate that the price of multilateral cooperation would be higher compared to gains, but they do raise a perspective on parliamentary awareness of the costs associated with seeking shelter, while the role of necessity dominated the decision-making amid the Finnish geopolitical situation and aggressive and expanding neighbour behaviour.

Concluding remarks

Roughly two-thirds of the interviewed MPs from the previous term are currently serving as MP's, thus pointing to the direction that similar kinds of thoughts continue to be present in the Finnish parliament. Our research question was how Members of Parliament perceived international cooperation and used this to discuss how shelter as a foreign and security policy question is being considered among the Finnish political elite in the parliament. Direct references to shelter were seldom, and comments focused more on the rationale, motives, drivers and implications of different forms of cooperation. The coding illustrated that the Finnish parliamentarians were well aware of the costs associated with international cooperation but felt it was necessary, and ideas of cooperation providing shelter amid otherwise challenging geopolitical position were clearly present in the context of spring 2022 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, resulting in the shaped security environment in the Baltics.

On the other hand, international cooperation was also based on other reasons, such as a prior policy of cooperation enabling new and increased forms of cooperation. We did not separately ask about the economic or societal issues, so the results in that respect can be considerably different. For instance, with respect to the NATO membership, the economic aspect of political shelter seemed to be lacking in the comments, whereas the costs in terms of maintaining one's identity and values were present. In the Government's proposal to the parliament (HE315/2022VP) to accept the agreement on NATO membership and related aspects, it was also mentioned how the actual costs of the membership include different elements, and the final knowledge of these could only be achieved after the official membership had begun. The estimation based on the available information in 2022 was from 70 to 100 million euros. For the year 2025, the Finnish defence budget was estimated as 2.5% of the GDP (2.5 billion) and a total of 158 million was reserved for the NATO membership, including NATO's presence in Finland and contributing to NATO's military budget (Finnish Government, 2025). In terms of bilateral relations, it was, however, also pointed out that Finland's and Sweden's military capabilities are supporting each other, which could also be understood as pointing out that the countries are benefiting from each other's material support.

Considering the current situation with the US operation in Venezuela and discussions about the US's interest in Greenland has further increased the tensions between at least previously like-minded countries. These kinds of developments would undoubtedly have an effect related to costs of shelter

and the preferred shelter. In a recent New Year's speech by President Alexander Stubb, the strengthening of the Nordic cooperation was mentioned first and European cooperation second. Joint values and interests were used to support the argument. Finnish security is seen to be based on strong defence and NATO and EU memberships (Stubb, 2026), highlighting both unilateral and multilateral approaches. While we did not specifically look at identity-related questions with respect to shelter, they seem to be present in many of the discourses related to shelter, namely shelter as an opportunity with like-minded countries and shelter-related costs.

Declaration of use of AI

Claude AI was used as a tool to support ideational work in the formulation of themes for data analysis; however, the substantive analysis itself is based on the researchers' own assessment and argumentation.

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Appendix 1: Codebook

PARENT CODE: MULTI, BI, UNI

CODE: DISCURSIVE FRAMING OF SHELTER (DIS)

This captures HOW shelter-seeking is narrated—the valence and justification.

Main codes	Code	Label	Definition	Indicators, examples
Multilateralism Bilateralism Unilateralism	DIS- NEC	Shelter as necessity	Shelter framed as unavoidable requirement of structural position; without shelter the state cannot survive; options are either shelter or no shelter	Change of security environment; lack of stability; perceptions of threat; structural inequality Coding example: “että meillä kaikilla on suomalaisilla on niinku alitajuinen sukupolvien takaa tuleva sodan pelko johtuen tästä meidän geopolitiisesta sijainnista joka kaikilla suomalaisilla Venäjän hyökättyä Ukrainaan niin jollakin tavalla aktivoituu. Niin siitä tuli se valtava niin kun tietysti meillä itsellämme niin kun hätä, että apua miten Suomen käy. Mutta myöskin kansan parista äänestäjien parista tuli voimakas paine, et nyt Suomen pitää mennä Natoon.”

	DIS-OPP	Shelter as opportunity	Shelter framed as strategic choice enabling benefits;	<p>Expansion of military power; creating or strengthening of existing or new partnerships; opportunity to be under nuclear umbrella</p> <p>Coding example: "Öö itsehän olisin kannattanut Suomen ja Ruotsin puolustusliittoa joka tapauksessa Naton ulkopuolellakin. Minusta se olisi ollut yksi varteen otettava vaihtoehto, mut siitä ei sitten päästy keskustelemaan. Öö niin tota, ää ja tähän otan nyt tämmösen vaan, tämmösen teknisen esimerkin, mutta aika paljon tääl on tekniikkaa. Suomella on aivan valtava reservi, Suomella on aivan tykistö, meil on paljon panssarivaunuja. Me tullaan saamaan ja meil on tietysti paljon näitä hävittäjiä suhteessa todella paljon maan kokoon. Ja nyt me ostetaan vielä tota kalliilla öö näitä ohjusjärjestelmiä. Kun taas esimerkiks Ruotsilla on sitten varmaankin maailman parhaat sukellusveneet ja tulee olemaan ja nimenomaan Itämerelle meidän matalalle rannikolle parhaiten sopivat. Ruotsilla on valtava määrä hävittäjiä ja Ruotsilla on paljon sellaista mitä meillä ei ole. Niin tavallaan se, että kun Suomen ja Ruotsin puolustusvoima laittaa yhteen, niin ainakin tälleen niinkun materiaalisesti voitais katsoa, että se on niinkun Match made in heaven monella tapaa ja sit meil on se yhteinen poliittinen intressi."</p>
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	DIS-CST	Shelter costs acknowledged	Explicit discussion of trade-offs and/or autonomy constraints	<p>Danger to become dragged into military operations abroad without clear national interest; lack of shared values; “new finlandization”; asymmetric balance of power; lack of efficiency or other forms of challenges related to cooperation; costs associated by geopolitical position to cooperation</p> <p>Coding example: “Että tää meidän tietyt tremissit, jotka näis prosesseis asetetaan kaventaa kyl sitä keskustelua ja erilaisten niinku tulevaisuuskuvien rakentamista et se. Ja se johtaa mun mielest sitten reaktiivisuuteen ja visiottomuuteen ja varsinkin Suomen EU-politiikassa. Mut varmasti myös ulko ja turvallisuuspolitiikassa.”</p>
	DIS-MUT	Shelter as mutual benefit	Shelter framed as reciprocal rather than one-directional	<p>What Finland can bring to cooperation; what partners or organizations of cooperation can bring to Finland; strengthening of shared identity; strengthening of like-minded bloc of countries</p> <p>Coding example: “Mut sit toisaalta kyl mä niinkun ajattelen, että tää halu kuitenkin olla öö, et kyl niinkun se tietenkun on perusteena, et me halutaan olla niinkun turvallisuutta lisäävä jäsen, joka kantaa vastuunsa. Sit tavallaan voidaan odottaa, et muut kantaa vastuuta meistä. Kyl me niinkun silti niinkun lähdetään siitä, et se toimii.”</p>
	DIS-HIS	Historical justification	Shelter-seeking grounded in historical experience	<p>References to past crises, wars, lessons learned; prior policy of cooperation</p> <p>Coding example: “No tämä arvopohja se on toki pohjoismaiden kesken vielä suurempi, vaikka se ei perustu mihinkään eniten siihen sopimukseen tai sopimuksiin julistukseen käytännössä. Historiallisesti se on erittäin vahva.”</p>

	DIS-POL	Shelter as domestic political question	Domestic political drivers of foreign policy explaining shelter, shelter not as a question of state power, but as a question of domestic factors	<p>unity; party politics; other domestic actors than the public, like the Finnish Defence Forces</p> <p>Coding example: “Eli tähän muuttu tää turvallisuusympäristö ihmisten mielissä ja reaali maailmassa. Ja se keskustelu mitä eduskunnassa täst käytiin, niin sehän reagoi vain tähän näin, se vaan reagoi tähän näin.”</p>
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Appendix 2

List of the interviewed parliamentarians in alphabetical order:

Biaudet, Eva
Harjanne, Atte
Hassi, Satu
Honkasalo, Veronika
Honkonen, Petri
Kaikkonen, Antti
Kempfi, Hilikka
Kiljunen, Kimmo
Koskinen, Johannes
Könttä, Joonas
Mäkinen, Riitta
Mäkynen, Matias
Niikko, Mika
Packalén, Tom
Sankelo, Janne
Saramo, Jussi
Tuomioja, Erkki
Valkonen, Ville
Vanhanen, Matti
Vikman, Sofia
Wallinheimo, Sinuhe
Östman, Peter

Party I interview	No. of terms
Center party (5)	
I 2	2
I 5	1
I 6	1
I 14	5
I 18	7
Social Democrats (5)	
I 2	11
I 8	5
I 12	7
I 13	1
I 15	2
Left Alliance (2)	
I 3	1
I 7	1
Swedish People's Party (1)	
I 4	6
Green Party (2)	
I 9	6
I 11	1
Finns Party (2)	
I 10	2
I 21	3
National Coalition Party (4)	
I 16	3
I 17	2
I 19	3
I 20	1
Christian Democrats (1)	
I 11	3