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Editors

Editorial board

Contents

Peer-Reviewed Articles

Discussion articles

Book reviews

Editorial

In the past decade or so, it has become commonplace to describe the current state of international politics in the language of great power or strategic competition. Regardless of what one may think of such potentially simplistic monikers, other actors in the international system cannot escape the disruptive implications of changing great power dynamics, as illustrated by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the disruptive policies of the United States under the second Trump administration, or China's increasing willingness to assert its interests in its near abroad and international fora. This special issue provides perspectives on how great power politics influences the Nordics. It is unsurprising that Nordic reactions to Russia's revisionist aims and conduct with respect to the European security order is a throughline of the contributions.

In their article, Anna Kronlund, Teemu Häkkinen and Hannu Salomaa illustrate how geopolitical necessity ultimately dominated, as Finnish political elites justified their choice of seeking shelter in NATO after Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine in 2022. Yet identity-related concerns also emerged, as the costs of cooperation were being weighed. In their contribution, Aadne Aasland and Marthe Handå Myhre point to the importance of elite cues and shared security-related narratives in influencing Norwegian public opinion on Russia at a time of profound deterioration in relations between a smaller state and a disproportionately powerful neighbour. At extraordinary times, the strength of broadly shared security tropes seems to outweigh other key variables, such as geography, personal experience or information.

However, even in the face of geopolitical imperatives driving the security choices and public perceptions of regional states, Elena Kravchik and Rinna Kullaa show that Finland and Sweden's inclusion in NATO has opened space for multifaceted Nordic agency in Arctic security. In this way, necessity can breed – not only constrain – policy agency in a world of strategic competition.

The discussion articles of the special issue zoom in on the shifting role of the United States vis-à-vis the international order writ large and the Nordic and Arctic regions, more specifically. Deborah McCarthy's article argues that the survival of a liberal international order depends on the willingness of US allies and partners to fill gaps left by the second Trump administration intent on rescinding its international responsibilities. Lauri Tähtinen illustrates the interlinkages between the US' increased focus on the Western Hemisphere and its Arctic engagement. Nicholas Glesby and Ryan Dean, in turn, map the shared security threats to the North American and European Arctics in a world of hybrid threats, climate crisis and great power tensions.

Joel Linnainmäki assesses the Nordic countries' Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) with the United States. He argues that such treaties are less a reflection of exceptional relationships between these states and the US, and more an indication of an overall US approach to Europe – for better or for worse. Finally, Cordelia Buchanan Ponczek tackles the key variables of urgency and importance for assessing the choices and dilemmas in US foreign and security policy. She thus proposes a novel toolkit that analysts can draw upon to assess great power agency in an evolving international environment.

Finally, Matti Pesu reviews two autobiographical works aimed at legacy-building, by former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö and former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg. Both books come to underline how Russia's intransigence ultimately scuttled any attempts at managing the relationship between Moscow and the West through dialogue, illustrating that well-meaning relationship management can only go so far when a neighbouring great power is intent on extreme revisionism. We are certain that the following pages will provide readers with novel and enlightening perspectives on how the Nordic region relates to and is shaped by today's great power politics.

Ville Sinkkonen, Johanna Vuorelma and Sanna Salo

Peer-Reviewed Article

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

Anna Kronlund, Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Jyväskylä
Teemu Häkkinen, Senior Researcher, Laurea University of Applied Science
Hannu Salomaa, Post-Doctoral Researcher, University of Jyväskylä

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 Häkkänen 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; Salonius-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; Salonius-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 Thorhallson 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.

Kronlund, Häkkinen and Salomaa (2025) 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. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 6–28.

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 (Thorhallson 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" (Thorhallson 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

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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 (Limnéll, 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

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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 Table1 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 NORDEFCO, 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 geopoliittisesta 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;	Expansion of military power; creating or strengthening of existing or new partnerships; opportunity to be under nuclear umbrella 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 voitas katsoa, että se on niinkun Match made in heaven monella tapaa ja sit meil on se yhteinen poliittinen intressi."

Kronlund, Häkkinen and Salomaa (2025) 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. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 6–28.

	DIS-CST	Shelter costs acknowledged	Explicit discussion of trade-offs and/or autonomy constraints	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 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."
	DIS-MUT	Shelter as mutual benefit	Shelter framed as reciprocal rather than one-directional	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 Coding example: "Mut sit toisaalta kyl mä niinkun ajattelen, että tää halu kuitenkin olla öö, et kyl niinkun se tietenkin 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."
	DIS-HIS	Historical justification	Shelter-seeking grounded in historical experience	References to past crises, wars, lessons learned; prior policy of cooperation 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."

	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	unity; party politics; other domestic actors than the public, like the Finnish Defence Forces Coding example: “Eli täähän muuttu tää turvallisuusympäristö ihmisten mielissä ja reaalimaailmassa. Ja se keskustelu mitä eduskunnassa täst käytiin, niin sehän reagoi vain tähän näin, se vaan reagoi tähän näin.”

Kronlund, Häkkinen and Salomaa (2025) 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. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 6–28.

Appendix 2

List of the interviewed parliamentarians in alphabetical order:

Biaudet, Eva

Harjanne, Atte

Hassi, Satu

Honkasalo, Veronika

Honkonen, Petri

Kaikkonen, Antti

Kemppi, Hilkka

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
1 19	3
1 20	1
Christian Democrats (1)	
I 11	3

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Peer-Reviewed Article

Responding to broken relations: Linkage and Norwegian attitudes towards Russia

Aadne Aasland, Research professor, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University

Marthe Handå Myhre, Senior researcher, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University

Abstract

This article examines the effects of various forms of linkage on public attitudes towards foreign relations. Focusing on Norway, it analyses attitudes towards Russia, Russians and Norway's Russia policy following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Rather than assuming a single continuum of pro- or anti-Russian sentiment, the article explores whether and how geographical, personal, informational and interest-driven linkages are associated with distinct attitudinal dimensions. Drawing on a nationally representative survey, we first use Principal Component Analysis to identify the underlying structure of Russia-related attitudes. Four dimensions emerge: geopolitical outlooks, attitudes towards ordinary Russians, support for distancing from Russia, and security threat perceptions. In a second step, the analysis shows that linkage plays a limited role in explaining geopolitical outlooks, which appear largely insulated from individual-level connections and experiences with Russia. By contrast, it is more strongly associated with attitudes towards ordinary Russians, support for distancing from Russia, perceptions of security threats, and the likelihood of expressing uncertainty. These findings highlight that different types of linkage do not have a uniform effect across different aspects of foreign policy opinion.

Keywords

Russia, Norway, public opinion

Introduction

Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine since 2022 has changed Russia's relations with other European states fundamentally. Based on survey data from 2024[1], this article examines how the Norwegian public views various Russia-related issues, such as Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and Norway's policies toward Russia, and Russian citizens. Its main focus is whether and how different forms of 'linkage' influence these perceptions or contribute to respondents' indecision. In this study, *linkage* refers to a broad spectrum of personal and contextual ties to Russia, including family or friendship connections with Russians, travel to Russia, geographic proximity, interest in Russian affairs, and consumption of Russia-related news.

Much of the literature on public opinion on foreign relations is based on the US. This has had an impact on theories where the public is seen partly as disentangled from and disinterested in foreign relations (Kertzer 2023). Previous studies have pointed to a lack of research on foreign and security policy attitudes from a Nordic and small-state perspective (Wechman, 2023). Several of the existing studies that do focus on small states are limited to public opinion on NATO membership (Wechman, 2023; Forsberg, 2015; Kostadinova, 2000) or NATO and the EU (Tvinnereim, 2025). In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, some studies have been conducted on views of Russia in countries formerly constituting part of the Soviet Union (Ekman, 2024; Chapman and Zhandayeva, 2024) and public opinion on security and defence matters in the EU (Fernández et al., 2023). To our knowledge, this is the first comprehensive study to examine how a population that has never been under Russian or Soviet rule, yet is geographically close to Russia, perceives policies toward Russia, including the war in Ukraine, in the post-2022 context.

Norway is an interesting case for investigating views of Russia exactly because it is close geographically, and at the same time distant, in terms of its societal model and international alignments. Norway and Russia share a 198-kilometre border in the high north – underlining both their geographic proximity and the asymmetry of a relationship, where Russia has always been a central topic in Norwegian foreign relations (Rowe and Hønneland, 2010). Despite differences in size and military capacity, Norway's NATO membership has helped create a certain balance in its relations with Russia. Moreover, unlike Finland and Sweden, Norway has never been at war with Russia, nor has it been under Soviet occupation, as for example the Baltic states. During the Second World War, parts of Finnmark county were liberated by the Red Army, which subsequently withdrew in accordance with existing agreements (Holtsmark, 2015, pp. 253–262). The liberation left behind a historical memory of the Soviets as liberators of Norwegian territory (Myklebost and Markussen, 2021).

After WW2, Norway pursued a policy aimed at balancing deterrence and reassurance: remaining a loyal NATO member while imposing self-restrictions, such as prohibiting nuclear weapons in peacetime and refraining from military exercises near the Russian border (Friis, 2018; Heier, 2018). From the late Soviet era, pragmatic cooperation developed in fisheries and environmental management, later expanded through the Barents collaboration to cultural and civil society collaboration (Rowe, 2008; Holm-Hansen and Aasland, 2024). After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, when Russia was economically weak, Norwegian authorities started encouraging so-called people-to-people and economic cooperation. Particularly in the northern border area, there was much contact and a lot of joint projects right up until the full-scale invasion (Holm-Hansen and Aasland, 2024). A milestone in the relationship between the two countries – at least from a Norwegian perspective - was the agreement signed in 2010 delimiting

1 The descriptive results from this survey have previously been published in a Norwegian language policy-brief (See Aasland and Myhre, 2024a).

Aasland and Myhre (2025) Responding to broken relations: Linkage and Norwegian attitudes towards Russia. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 29–49.

the maritime boundary in the Barents Sea (Rowe et al., 2022).

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 led Norway to condemn the breach of international law and suspend high-level meetings (Rowe, 2018). From 2015 onwards, Norway combined continued sanctions with a gradual resumption of limited cooperation (Holm-Hansen, 2023; Stormoen and Friis, 2025). In 2019, Prime Minister Erna Solberg completed the first state visit after the annexation, and in 2021, the new Labour–Centre coalition aimed to further develop bilateral cooperation (Holm-Hansen, 2023). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, marked an immediate shift, ending most collaboration (Wilhelmsen, 2025), but exceptions were still made for cooperation within nuclear preparedness and fisheries management (Regjeringen, 2022, March 4; Vyvial, 2023). Norwegian authorities have since maintained consistent support for Ukraine, including the long-term Nansen Programme, which provides annual military and humanitarian assistance over five years, and probably longer (Regjeringen, 2022, February 28; Regjeringen, 2023, February 16).

Despite the fact that both Finland and Norway border Russia, few studies have looked at public opinion towards Russia in the Nordic states (for an exception in Norway, see Narud et al., 2010). In an international study from 2014 of attitudes towards the performance of the Russian regime, Norwegians were in the lead in being sceptical: 89% of the respondents answered that they disapprove of the performance of the leadership of Russia (Gallup, 2015). In a 2022 follow-up, Norway remained among the ten most critical countries (Gallup, 2022). Despite this scepticism, many Norwegians have been open to trade and cooperation also in the period after Russia's annexation of Crimea and during their continued warfare in Donbas. In a 2020 survey, 58% preferred "a good economic relation" over "a rough attitude" towards Russia, while respondents were split on whether Norway should cooperate more or less: 35% said less, 30% more, and 35% were unsure (Svendsen and Weltzien, 2020).

Surveys in the Baltic states before and after Russia's full-scale invasion show how the threat perception of Russia increased after 2014 and again after 2022. While ethnic Latvians' threat perception increased in both surveys, the threat perception of Russia among Russian speakers in Latvia increased only after 2022 (Ekman, 2024). Awareness of Russia as a threat is very likely to have increased among the Norwegian population too. Against the backdrop of sabotage incidents across Europe, Norway is perceived as particularly vulnerable, especially due to its role as a key energy supplier (Hansen and Moe, 2025). Media reports and the Norwegian Intelligence Service's 2025 report have highlighted concerns about hybrid threats and sabotage linked to Norway's support for Ukraine (Etterretningstjenesten, 2025).

Since people in Norway originating from Russia constitute only around 22,000 people, it is not feasible to single out 'Russian speakers' in a survey as in the Latvian case. However, Norway's history of relations with Russia and the emphasis on cooperation, particularly in Northern Norway, gives reason to believe that people in Norway have different degrees of attachment to Russia. Due to Russia's importance for Norway as a big neighbour, Norwegians are likely to follow Russia closely because of a rather wide media coverage of this country. However, no studies have previously measured Norwegians' degree of attachment to Russia, how interested they are in Russian affairs and how informed, through the media, they perceive themselves to be about Russia.

In this article we ask:

How are different types of linkage to Russia associated with variation in Norwegians' attitudes towards Russia, Russians and Norway's Russia policy, and how are different types of linkage associated with being indecisive when responding to politically sensitive Russia-related questions?

Instead of a narrow focus, we study four broader thematic areas of Russia-related attitudes: 1) Norwegian Russia policy and Norway's relations with Russia; 2) views on ordinary Russians versus the

Russian regime; 3) the war in Ukraine; and 4) alignment with official Russian narratives. Drawing on a nationally representative survey, we first use Principal Component Analysis to identify the underlying structure of attitudes relating to these themes. Four attitudinal dimensions emerge that partly reflect, but also cross-cut these themes. In a second step, we examine whether and how various forms of linkage are associated with individual respondents' positions on these dimensions. We also examine how linkage relates to the likelihood of being undecided or declining to express an opinion on our politically sensitive survey questions. Kleinberg and Fornberg (2017) have found that researchers pay little attention to "don't know" and "no opinion" responses in surveys on foreign policy, which can lead to misleading conclusions about the level of support for particular foreign policies and the public's level of engagement. To our knowledge our study is the first attempt to systematically analyse the impact of various forms of linkage on answering "do not know" in a survey on foreign relations issues.

Engaging with these topics, the study aims to tease out nuances in Norwegians' views on Russia and to identify which forms of linkage are associated with variation in these views. We argue that it is particularly relevant to examine linkage when conducting attitudinal surveys about neighbouring states. Which types of linkage matter is likely to vary depending on historical and contemporary relations between countries. We argue that the Norwegian-Russian case is both special and analytically relevant since Norway and Russia are neighbouring countries characterised by asymmetric power relations, opposing security alliances, and limited – though temporally and spatially variable – social contact across the border.

Theory: Linkage and public opinion on foreign relations

Scholars disagree about the extent to which public attitudes actually influence policy decisions (Onderco and Stoeckel, 2023). According to the Almond-Lippmann consensus, public opinion is ignorant, volatile and disconnected from foreign policy (Forsberg, 2024). Following that view, citizens lack information, react either too slowly or too strongly to foreign threats, and foreign policy should therefore be guided by objective national interests rather than public preferences (Holsti, 1992; Thomson et al., 2023). That strain of research, though, has been countered by scholars who find public opinion to be quite stable in general and that when it changes, it is due to external events, such as changes in the security situation, thus logical reactions (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Ziegler, 1998; Eichenberg, 2007). However, if recognising that studying public opinion on foreign relations matters, the question arises about what influences people's views on foreign relations.

One paradigm in the literature ascribes people's opinions to elite cues and mass media (Kertzer, 2023). In these top-down models, decision-makers are thought to have an impact on public opinion by controlling and framing the information available. Public attitudes are seen as mirroring elite views and shifting when these change (Forsberg, 2024). In times of increased threat and international crises, several studies have found a rally around the flag effect, whereby support for state leaders increases and public opinion on foreign relations becomes more uniform (see Kertzer, 2023, p. 460 for examples from the literature). While some explain this with changes in the information environment, such as ideas conveyed through the media becoming less diverse (Kertzer, 2023), others have argued that the public responds independently to major events rather than just being a victim of elite (and media) manipulation (Eichenberg, 2016). However, if rational and worth taking into account – what factors may help explain differing views, if elite cues are not the only thing that matters?

Several factors are commonly assumed to influence attitudes towards foreign policy, including ideology, party affiliation, views on military power and gender (Eichenberg, 2016). Previous studies have, for example, found that women are less supportive of using military force and generally more sceptical

Aasland and Myhre (2025) Responding to broken relations: Linkage and Norwegian attitudes towards Russia. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 29–49.

of war as a policy instrument (Eichenberg, 2016). Some of this literature has looked into people's preferences with regard to the use of force contra cooperative internationalism, or to what extent they are in favour of solving problems multilaterally within the framework of, for instance, the UN or solving problems by the use of military force (Kertzer, 2023). Kertzer (2023) has noted that a challenge within some of this research is that it is able to tell us that some people's views are more (or less) hawkish than others, but not why.

Recent studies have investigated how different types of linkage may impact public opinion on a foreign country or narratives promoted by a foreign state. Even though these studies do not explicitly relate to the aforementioned theories of public opinion on foreign relations, they examine factors that have been largely overlooked in this literature and thereby contribute to it. This concerns work that opens up for different types of linkage affecting individuals' views on foreign policies, and their views on foreign countries in particular.

In our study, we build on Szostek (2017, p. 328) who argues for "a more holistic appreciation of how views of international politics shape and are shaped by the social and communicative practices of individuals". She points to the extensive literature on 'soft power' that, to a large extent, investigates what states do in order to have an impact on people in other states, but focuses less on the recipient side and the effects of those policies. Szostek borrows the concept of linkage from Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2005) who used it in the 1990s to show that democratisation is more likely in countries with stronger linkage to the West. Lucas and Way defined linkage as ties, both economic, political, diplomatic, social and organisational as well as cross-border flows of capital, goods, services, people and information between states (Lucas and Way, in Szostek 2017, 380).

While Levitsky and Way focused on linkage on a state level, Szostek (2017) focuses on linkage on the level of individuals, looking at how it affected Ukrainians' receptivity towards Russian and Ukrainian strategic narratives respectively. In the case of Ukraine, Szostek (2017) tested types of linkage such as media use and personal ties to Russia and Russian culture (regularly attending an Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, regularly travelling to Russia or speaking to friends and relatives there). The effect of personal ties finds support in social psychology, where greater personal interaction has been found to reduce prejudice and hostility towards an outgroup (Szostek, 2017, p. 381). Szostek points out, however, that it is less clear if such affinity to foreign individuals translates into affinity towards the foreign state and its policies.

Chapman and Zhandayeva (2024) found that media use, ethnic identity, and economic ties to Russia interact in shaping opinions about Russia in Central Asia. While ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan were generally more sympathetic to Russian narratives, broader Russian-speaking groups were less uniformly supportive, and economic dependence did not always predict more positive views. Also, Ekman's aforementioned study on the threat perception of Russia in Latvia may be seen as an example of how linkage matters – as variations in views were detected between 'Russian speakers' and other Latvians (Ekman, 2024).

Building on Szostek's (2017) work on linkage, we capture both concrete forms of cross-border contact and broader patterns of engagement defining linkage as various forms of attachment to Russia in a broad respect. These include family or friendships with Russians, travels to Russia, geographic proximity to Russia, interest in Russia and consumption of news about Russia. The latter aspect of news consumption may also be seen as a way of measuring how exposed people are to elite cues about Russia. What types of linkage are relevant to include, we argue, is context dependent – and while some of the ones used in this article will also be relevant for views on Russia in other countries – others will have to be refined or adjusted according to the local context. In Norway, for instance, it is less relevant

to ask about consumption of Russia-run news outlets, as consumption of these is thought to be very low. Neither, as already noted, is it feasible to single out 'Russian speakers', as they are relatively few. Below, we operationalise the four types of linkage that are analysed in this paper: Personal linkage, Geographical linkage, Informational linkage, and Interest-driven linkage.

Data, methods and descriptive overview of survey items

Data were collected through a nationally representative survey conducted by the Norwegian opinion polling agency Respons Analyse on behalf of the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research at Oslo Metropolitan University in August 2024. Respons Analyse used its established web panel to randomly select respondents. In total, 1,344 individuals completed the questionnaire. To correct for sampling biases related to gender, age and an overrepresentation of respondents from Northern Norway[2], post-stratification weights were applied. The questionnaire included 28 attitudinal statements covering different aspects of Norway's relationship with Russia for which respondents indicated their level of agreement on a four-point scale ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree", with an additional "do not know" option (see below/next section for details).

To identify broader attitudinal structures underlying these responses, we conducted a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) using oblimin rotation, which allows for correlations between components. Rather than analysing attitudes towards individual survey items, the PCA groups related items into broader attitudinal dimensions based on how respondents combine their views across questions. Components with eigenvalues above 1.0 were retained.

This approach makes it possible to examine whether attitudes towards different aspects of Russia are organised along one or several underlying dimensions, and to analyse how such dimensions – rather than single opinions – are associated with linkage and socio-demographic characteristics. To examine how different forms of linkage relate to variation across these attitudinal dimensions, we estimated a series of linear regression models with the factor scores as dependent variables. The primary independent variables capture four forms of linkage to Russia (to be described in the following section). In addition, we include a limited set of socio-demographic and political variables – such as gender, age, education, urban-rural settlement and political orientation – as control variables.

In a supplementary regression analysis, we also examined the likelihood of respondents selecting the "do not know" option on attitudinal items. This model treats uncertainty as an outcome in its own right, allowing us to assess whether patterns of indecision are systematically related to various forms of linkage as well as to certain background characteristics.

The questionnaire was structured to capture different aspects of opinion, including questions on Norway's relations with Russia and Norwegian Russia policy, attitudes toward ordinary Russians and the Russian regime, assessments of the war in Ukraine and its consequences, and the extent to which respondents support or reject narratives promoted by Russian authorities. A full table with the full question wordings and response distributions is provided in Table A1 in the Appendix.

At a descriptive level, the responses point to a combination of broad consensus and issue-specific differentiation. Responses on several core questions related to the war in Ukraine and Norway's geopolitical alignment are characterised by either high or low mean values (depending on the content of the statement) and limited dispersion, indicating widely shared views. Most Norwegians

2 The overrepresentation of respondents from Northern Norway was deliberate, in order to secure sufficient statistical power for analyses involving regional variation.

support sending weapons to Ukraine, blame Russia (and only Russia) for the war, and endorse NATO enlargement to Finland and Sweden.

At the same time, attitudes are more varied on questions concerning relations with ordinary Russians, the degree of desired distancing from Russia, and the longer-term implications of the war in Ukraine for Norway–Russia relations. These issues tend to display mean values closer to the midpoint of the scale and greater dispersion, suggesting that respondents hold more differentiated and sometimes ambivalent positions when questions move beyond immediate geopolitical alignment.

A further noteworthy pattern concerns the prevalence of "do not know" responses, which varies substantially across issue areas (Appendix Table A1). Uncertainty is relatively low on questions directly linked to the war in Ukraine and Norway's security orientation, but considerably higher on issues involving people-to-people cooperation, views on ordinary Russians, and broader assessments of Russia's motivations and security interests. It is worth noting that items characterised by greater dispersion in responses also tend to correspond with higher levels of uncertainty. This indicates that while some aspects of debates involving Russia appear relatively uniform in public opinion, others are more contested, and the latter also tend to be subject to greater uncertainty.

Linkage: Operationalisation and results

Building on the theoretical conceptualisation of linkage presented above, this section describes how we operationalise the four types of linkage identified in the theory section: personal/experiential, geographical, informational and interest-driven. These types of linkage are translated into measurable indicators that reflect how individuals in Norway are connected to Russia.

Personal linkage is measured through two variables: (1) whether respondents have visited Russia at any point in their lives (once or several times), and (2) whether they have Russian family or friends. These indicators reflect the interpersonal and experiential aspects of linkage: past travel provides first-hand knowledge and familiarity, while personal networks may foster sympathy with Russians and thereby different evaluations of Russian society and politics towards Russia and Russians.

Geographical linkage is captured through a regional variable distinguishing respondents in Northern Norway from those in the southern parts of the country. Given historical ties and Northern Norway's closer cross-border ties and practical cooperation with Russia, people in the region are expected to experience different attitudinal patterns than those in the south. Geographical proximity is likely to be reflected in the everyday visibility of Russia and in the ways in which people in the north understand and evaluate Russia as a neighbour (Aasland and Myhre 2024b).

Informational linkage is measured through respondents' self-reported consumption of news about Russia. While we do not measure exposure to Russian media directly, frequent engagement with news *about* Russia provides a continuous flow of narratives through which citizens interpret Russia's actions. We expect that individuals who regularly follow news about Russia will have different attitudes from those who do not, and also that they are less likely to choose "don't know" responses. A high percentage of people following news about Russia closely could also indicate that Russian affairs are widely covered in Norwegian media.

Interest-driven linkage, finally, is operationalised through respondents' declared interest in Russian society. Interest is likely to function as a motivational orientation toward another country. We treat interest as a form of linkage that is likely to influence how individuals perceive a neighbouring country, its regime and its people. This represents a conceptual extension of the linkage framework applied

by Szostek (2017), implying that expressed interest may facilitate greater attention to, and familiarity with, aspects of the neighbouring society.

Together, these four operationalisations capture the primary channels through which Norwegians may be connected to Russia. They allow us to examine how different forms of linkage are associated with variation in attitudes towards Russia, Russians and Norway's Russia policy, as well as with differences in the likelihood of uncertainty when responding to politically sensitive questions.

Descriptive distributions of all linkage variables are shown in Table 1. A minority of respondents report personal or experiential linkages to Russia: almost one in five have visited the country (including 6% who have done so several times). Only 2% have Russian family, but around 15% have Russian friends. Almost one in ten of the weighted sample resides in Northern Norway, reflecting the population distribution. Informational and interest-driven linkages are widespread: the mean level of news consumption about Russia is 2.9 on a scale from 1 "no consumption" to 4 "large consumption", and for interest in Russian society it is 2.6 on a scale where 1 is "not at all interested" and 4 "very interested". Both variables are characterised by substantial variation (SDs of 0.8). These patterns suggest that while personal and geographical forms of linkage are concentrated among smaller segments of the population, informational and interest-driven linkages are more broadly distributed.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for linkage variables. Unweighted totals, weighted percentages, means and standard deviations.

		N (unweighted)	% (weighted)	Mean	SD
Geographic	Northern Norway	325	9.0		
	Southern Norway	1019	81.0		
Personal / experiential	Has Russian family and friends	13	0.8		
	Has Russian family	21	1.6		
	Has Russian friends	204	13.9		
	Has neither family nor friends	1106	83.8		
	Never been to Russia	1036	80.6		
	Been to Russia once	203	13.5		
	Been several times	105	5.8		
Informational	Degree follow news on Russia (scale 1-4)	1334		2.9	0.8
Interest-driven	How interested in Russia (scale 1-4)	1239		2.6	0.8

We also examined the correlation structure of the five linkage variables (Appendix Table A2). As expected, interest in Russian society and news consumption about Russia correlate moderately (Spearman's $\rho = .65$), reflecting that motivational and informational forms of linkage are related but not identical. Correlations between all other linkage indicators are much lower, suggesting that personal, geographical, informational and interest-driven linkage capture empirically distinct dimensions of connectedness.

Identifying Attitudinal Dimensions: PCA Analysis

Before examining how different forms of linkage relate to attitudes toward Russia, Russians and Norway's Russia policy, we used Principal Component Analysis (PCA) to explore whether multiple, distinct attitudinal dimensions underlie the 28 survey items. It is relevant to establish such a structure, since various forms of linkage to Russia may influence different aspects of opinion in different ways. Using an oblique rotation to allow for correlations between components, four dimensions emerged (Appendix Table A3).

Because the survey was organised around several thematic domains, some correspondence between item themes and component loadings was expected. The PCA therefore reflects both the initial conceptual grouping of items in the survey and the empirical patterns in how respondents combined their attitudes. The analysis revealed cross-cutting variation that does not fully mirror the thematic structure of the questionnaire shown in Table A1 in the Appendix, indicating that the four components capture broader attitudinal dimensions rather than simple thematic clusters. These components form the dependent variables in the subsequent regression analyses. We label these four dimensions as follows:

1. Geopolitical outlooks (27% of variance)

The first and largest dimension captures respondents' geopolitical orientation. Items loading strongly reflect alignment with or rejection of core Russian geopolitical claims, including views on Ukraine's territorial integrity, NATO enlargement, responsibility for the war, and Russia's security interests. High scores indicate greater acceptance of narratives sympathetic to Russia's position; low scores indicate strong endorsement of the official Norwegian position. Given the large number of items with high factor loadings, this dimension appears to reflect a broad and coherent constellation of foreign policy views.

2. Attitudes toward ordinary Russians (10% of variance)

The second dimension clusters items concerning whether respondents distinguish between the Russian regime and Russian citizens, support people-to-people cooperation, trust or distrust Russians in Norway, and whether asylum should be granted to Russians fleeing mobilisation. High scores reflect scepticism and reluctance to engage with ordinary Russians, whereas low scores reflect openness towards Russians and differentiation between ordinary Russians and the regime.

3. Support for distancing from Russia (5% of variance)

The third dimension reflects support for symbolic, cultural and diplomatic distancing from Russia. High loadings include breaking diplomatic ties, limiting Russian cultural expressions (exemplified by staging Russian plays) and negative prospects of reestablishing more friendly relations with Russia in the future. This represents a more moral stance on bilateral relations – it is not about geopolitical alignment, but about the depth and form of engagement Norway should maintain with Russia during wartime and beyond.

4. Security threat perception (5% of variance)

The fourth dimension consists of a single but strongly loading item: fear of Russian sabotage in Norway. Although only one item loads ≥0.5, its moderate cross-loadings with broader items on global threats indicate a distinct concern with Russia as an immediate security risk. This reflects the salience of hybrid threats in Norwegian post-2022 public discourse and is in line with research showing that threat perceptions can form separate attitudinal structures that influence foreign policy attitudes (Huddy et al., 2007).

The four components are only moderately correlated (Appendix Table A3), suggesting that while they are part of the same thematic landscape, they capture analytically distinct domains. This structure provides a coherent basis for examining how various forms of linkage to Russia are associated with different types of attitudes, rather than along a single continuum of pro- or anti-Russian sentiment.

Linkage and attitudinal dimensions: Regression results

To examine how different forms of linkage are associated with the attitudinal dimensions identified in the PCA, we estimated a series of linear regression models with the factor scores as dependent variables. Table 1 presents the results for the four dimensions, ordered according to their relative importance in terms of explained variance.

Across all models, the primary focus is on the linkage variables capturing geographical, personal/experiential, informational and interest-driven connections to Russia. Socio-demographic and political variables are included as controls to account for basic background characteristics, but the analysis is explicitly oriented toward assessing whether and how different forms of linkage are associated with distinct aspects of public opinion.

Table 1. Multiple linear regression. Dependent variables: Linkage dimension factor scores. Standard coefficients and significance (N=1313).

		Model 1 Geopolitical outlooks	**Model 2** Ordinary Russians	**Model 3** Distancing from Russia	**Model 4** Security threats
Linkage variables					
Geographical	Northern Norway (vs Southern)	0.00	0.01	0.04	-0.02
Personal/experiential	Several times (vs never)	0.06*	-0.02	-0.08**	-0.04
	Once (vs never)	-0.02	0.07**	-0.02	-0.03
	Has Russian family/friends (vs none)	0.03	-0.09**	-0.01	-0.09**
Informational	Follow news on Russia (scale 1-4)	-0.05	0.16**	0.06	0.21**
Interest-driven	Interest in Russia (scale 1-4)	-0.01	-0.06	-0.14**	0.00
Control variables					
Gender	Women (vs men)	-0.01	-0.13**	0.18**	-0.01
Age	Years	-0.06	0.11**	-0.04	0.12**
Education	Scale 1-5	-0.09**	-0.07**	-0.12**	-0.02
Settlement	Urban (vs rural)	-0.03	0.04	-0.01	0.00
Financial situation	Scale 1-5	-0.05	0.00	0.00	0.03
Party voting	Socialist (vs government)	0.04	-0.08*	0.05	-0.06
	Centre-right opposition (vs gov.)	-0.04	0.10**	0.03	0.05
	Progress party (vs gov.)	0.07	0.17**	0.03	0.04
	DNK/other (vs gov.)	0.04	0.05	0.03	-0.02
Adjusted R^2		**0.03**	**0.14**	**0.07**	**0.09**

Note: User-defined missing values (DNK/unsure/NA) were replaced with the mean for each item, since listwise deletion would have resulted in substantial case loss.

We begin with the largest attitudinal dimension, geopolitical outlooks. Despite accounting for the greatest share of variance in attitudes toward Russia, this dimension shows only limited associations

with the linkage variables. With the exception of having made more than one visit to Russia (associated with a very minor higher inclination towards Russian positions), most forms of linkage display weak and non-significant relationships with geopolitical outlooks, suggesting that this aspect of opinion is relatively insulated from patterns of linkage. This finding provides an important baseline for the subsequent analyses, indicating that not all aspects of public opinion are equally associated with different types of linkage.

Linkage relates more strongly and systematically to the second dimension, attitudes toward ordinary Russians. As shown in the table, several types of linkage are significantly associated with how respondents differentiate between the Russian regime and Russian citizens. Informational linkage, measured as following news about Russia, is positively associated with more sceptical views of ordinary Russians, while personal and experiential forms of linkage display the opposite pattern: Respondents who have visited Russia or who have family members or close friends in Russia are significantly more likely to express more inclusionary attitudes toward Russians.

The third attitudinal dimension captures support for symbolic, cultural and diplomatic distancing from Russia. As shown in the table, two linkage variables are significantly associated with this dimension. Respondents who report higher levels of interest in Russia and Russian society are less supportive of distancing measures, indicating a negative association between interest-driven linkage and preferences for disengagement. Likewise, respondents who have visited Russia several times express significantly lower support for distancing from Russia compared to those who have never visited the country. Having visited Russia only once, however, is not significantly associated with attitudes toward distancing.

The fourth attitudinal dimension concerns perceptions of Russia as a direct security threat to Norway, operationalised primarily through fear of Russian sabotage. This dimension displays another distinct pattern of associations compared to the previous dimensions. Informational linkage shows the clearest association with security threat perceptions. Respondents who report higher levels of news consumption about Russia are significantly more likely to express concern about Russian security threats. This association is substantively stronger than those observed for other linkage variables in this model. Still, we also find that respondents with Russian family members or friends are significantly less likely to express concern about Russian threats.

It is worth noting that geographical linkage, operationalised as residence in Northern Norway, shows no statistically significant association with any of the four attitudinal dimensions. In addition to the linkage variables, the models include a limited set of socio-demographic and political controls. These variables display some statistically significant associations with specific attitudinal dimensions. As with the linkage variables, the associations of the control variables are not uniform across dimensions and vary between models. Given the focus of the analysis, we do not pursue a detailed examination of these effects here. Instead, the control variables serve primarily to ensure that the observed associations between linkage and attitudes are not driven by basic background characteristics.

Linkage and uncertainty

As shown in the descriptive overview, the prevalence of "do not know" responses varies substantially across survey items. Analysis of uncertainty further shows that it also varies systematically across the four identified attitudinal dimensions.[3] Expressed uncertainty was highest for items grouped under geopolitical outlooks, followed by attitudes toward ordinary

3 We measured this by calculating the mean percentage of "do not know" for items within each dimension with a factor loading of 0.5 or higher.

Russians and support for distancing from Russia, and was lowest for security threat perceptions.[4] At the same time, we observe considerable variation within each dimension. This is particularly evident for geopolitical outlooks and views on ordinary Russians, which include items characterised by both the highest and the lowest shares of "do not know" responses. In sum, variation both between items and across attitudinal dimensions indicates that some aspects of the debate on Russia are more settled in public opinion than others.

In addition to the variation between issues, there is also substantial and systematic variation between respondents in their overall propensity to answer "do not know". Only 28 per cent of respondents provided substantive answers to all attitudinal items, while the median number of "do not know" responses was two. At the other extreme, a small minority consistently refrained from expressing an opinion across most questions.

To analyse the profile of respondents most prone to indecision, we estimated a linear regression model with the total number of "do not know" responses per respondent as the dependent variable. The independent variables mirror those used in the subsequent analyses of attitudinal dimensions and include both linkage variables and basic socio-demographic controls (Table 2).

Table 2. Multiple linear regression. Dependent variable: Number of "do not know" responses. Standard coefficients and significance (N=1313).

		Standard coefficient
Linkage variables		
Geographic	Northern Norway (vs Southern)	0.02
Personal/experiential	Several times (vs never)	-0.01
	Once (vs never)	-0.04
	Has Russian family/friends (vs none)	-0.06*
Informational	Follow news on Russia (scale 1-4)	-0.18**
Interest-based	Interest in Russia (scale 1-4)	-0.08*
Background variables		
Gender	Women (vs men)	0.26**
Age	Years	-0.14**
Education	Scale 1-5	-0.03
Settlement	Urban (vs rural)	-0.02
Financial situation	Scale 1-5	-0.05*
Party voting	Socialist (vs government)	-0.03
	Centre-right opposition (vs gov.)	-0.01
	Progress party (vs gov.)	-0.05
	DNK/other (vs gov.)	0.11**
Adjusted R squared		**0.25**

The model explains a substantial share of the variation in indecision (adjusted $R^2 = 0.25$), considerably more than the corresponding models predicting attitudinal factor scores. Several linkage-related variables display statistically significant associations with uncertainty. As we anticipated, respondents who report low levels of news consumption about Russia are markedly more likely to select "do

4 Mean shares of "do not know" were respectively 19%, 14%, 12% and 8%.

Aasland and Myhre (2025) Responding to broken relations: Linkage and Norwegian attitudes towards Russia. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 29–49.

not know", and a higher interest in Russian society is also associated with fewer missing responses. Furthermore, having family members or close friends in Russia is linked to lower levels of indecision. In sum, these findings point to a close relationship between uncertainty and limited informational, interest-driven and interpersonal linkage to the issue area.

Among the control variables, women and younger respondents are significantly more likely to express uncertainty across items, while respondents who report uncertainty or disengagement from party politics are likewise more prone to indecision. With the exception of education, which shows no statistically significant association with uncertainty, these background effects are broadly consistent with previous research on political confidence and issue salience. They are not examined further here.

Concluding discussion: Linkage and attitudinal dimensions

This study demonstrates that Norwegian attitudes towards Russia are not best represented as a single continuum ranging from pro- to anti-Russian sentiment. Rather, the analysis reveals a multidimensional structure consisting of four distinct attitudinal dimensions that are only moderately correlated. One dimension – geopolitical outlooks – stands out as the clearly most important. This dimension includes positions on NATO enlargement, responsibility for the war in Ukraine, sanctions, territorial integrity and Russia's security claims, and thus combines items that we initially organised under different themes in the survey design. In addition to the dominant geopolitical dimension, the analysis identified three further attitudinal dimensions that capture more relational, normative and experiential aspects of Norwegian views of Russia. These are attitudes towards ordinary Russians, support for distancing from Russia, and security threat perceptions.

The central finding of this article is that all types of linkage included in this study play a limited role in influencing Norwegian geopolitical orientations towards Russia, but a substantially more pronounced role for the latter three dimensions of public opinion identified. Across the analyses, most forms of linkage – geographical, personal, informational and interest-based – show weak and largely insignificant associations with the dominant geopolitical dimension. This suggests that broader geopolitical outlooks are relatively independent of individual-level experiences and connections to Russia. This pattern is consistent with research emphasising the role of elite cues and opinion consolidation in situations of increased external threat and conflict. When relations with a neighbouring great power deteriorate, it is not surprising that public opinion in small states aligns closely with official policy positions and dominant security frames. Thus, geopolitical outlooks appear to be formed less by different types of linkage and more by shared national narratives and political consensus.

By contrast, the three remaining attitudinal dimensions; attitudes towards ordinary Russians, support for cultural and diplomatic distancing, and perceptions of security threats are systematically associated with the types of linkage that we have tested. However, the relationships with the different types of linkage are quite differentiated. Personal and experiential connections to Russia via Russian friends and travels are associated with more inclusionary views of Russians and lower support for distancing measures, confirming previous research that finds that greater personal interaction reduces prejudice and hostility towards an outgroup (Szostek 2017). That said, our study confirms that such personal and experiential connections do not seem to affect people's geopolitical orientations. In this way our study answers 'not necessarily' to Szostez's question of whether affinity to foreign individuals translates into affinity towards the foreign state and its policies. Russia was perceived as slightly less of a threat among those with personal and experiential linkage, but we did not find that such linkage has an effect on their general geopolitical orientation.

Informational and interest-driven linkage (news consumption and expressed interest in the country) show different and sometimes opposing effects. Particularly noteworthy is the role of informational linkage. Following news about Russia is associated with heightened perceptions of security threats, suggesting that greater informational exposure does not necessarily moderate attitudes, but may instead increase threat perceptions. This finding is plausibly linked to the nature of Russian coverage in Norwegian media, which largely reflects official security assessments and elite framing of Russia as indeed a strategic and hybrid threat. However, despite its association with threat perceptions, informational linkage does not appear to have an effect on respondents' broader geopolitical orientations. One possible explanation is that elite cues about Russia are widely available through multiple channels, reaching also those who do not actively follow news about the country.

Informational, interest-based and personal linkage have their strongest and most consistent association with uncertainty. Respondents with lower levels of informational and interest-driven linkage and fewer personal connections to Russia are significantly more likely to refrain from expressing an opinion. This finding illustrates that linkage not only affects what attitudes people hold, but also whether they feel able or willing to take a stance. Different types of linkage can thereby be interpreted as a facilitator for opinion formation on complex and contested foreign policy issues. The indecisive have commonly been omitted from studies on public opinion on foreign relations, but here we show that different types of linkage do matter for people's willingness to take a stand.

Historically, residents of Northern Norway have maintained closer cross-border ties with Russia, particularly during periods of active Barents cooperation. It would therefore be reasonable to expect that geographic linkage, as defined in our study, could have an impact on attitudinal patterns. Our findings, however, suggest that regional differences in Norwegian attitudes towards Russia are modest. This does not necessarily imply that people in the North and South share the same views on Russia across all issues. On individual survey items attitudes can be quite different based on geography. The net effect, however, is a regional pattern that resembles the national average.

A broader implication of this study is that linkage must be understood as a context-dependent phenomenon. As a border country to Russia, Norway represents a special case: a small NATO member with a clear geopolitical alignment, limited societal integration with Russia, and a relationship characterised by cooperation in some areas and during limited periods, but with sharp asymmetry in power and security. Such contextual factors help explain why the different types of linkage in the Norwegian case play a limited role for geopolitical orientations, but are much more relevant for the other dimensions identified. In small states facing a neighbouring great power, core foreign policy orientations may be structured primarily by elite cues and national security narratives. At the same time, what we have called personal and experiential linkage matters for how people relate to the neighbouring society and its people, how they evaluate the importance of ties between the countries, and how secure or threatened they feel.

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on cross-sectional survey data collected at a single point in time, during a period of heightened international tension following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Attitudes towards Russia, and the role of different types of linkage in forming them, may look different in periods characterised by lower levels of geopolitical conflict and more stable bilateral relations. Longitudinal studies, ideally based on panel data tracking the same respondents over time, would be valuable for examining how attitudinal structures and the effects of different types of linkage develop as international contexts change.

Second, the attitudinal dimensions identified through the factor analysis are necessarily sensitive to the content of the survey items. While the questionnaire was deliberately designed to capture a broad

range of issues that have featured prominently in Norwegian public debate, alternative item selections might have produced somewhat different dimensional structures. At the same time, the emergence of coherent and interpretable dimensions that cut across the initial thematic groupings suggests that the analysis captures meaningful underlying patterns.

Third, several of the linkage measures employed in the study are relatively coarse. In particular, informational linkage is measured through self-reported news consumption about Russia, without distinguishing between different media platforms, sources or types of coverage. More fine-grained measures of media exposure could provide additional insights into how different information sources affect attitudes towards Russia and perceptions of threat.

Finally, the findings are specific to the Norwegian context. One should therefore be cautious about generalising the results to other national contexts, particularly those with different historical relations, demographic compositions or media environments. Many states bordering Russia have histories of shared statehood and large Russian-speaking minorities. National contexts may profoundly affect how attitudes towards Russia and Russians are formed, and they are decisive for what types of linkage it would be relevant to include in a study.

This study shows that the effects of different linkage types on public opinion on foreign policy should not be overstated, but it should also not be dismissed. In contexts marked by geopolitical conflict and clear alliance alignment, core foreign policy orientations may be largely insulated from individual-level connections and experiences. At the same time, linkage remains significant for how citizens during heightened bilateral tension relate to a neighbouring great power and its people, assess continued engagement with this country and perceive security risks. It also turns out to be significant for whether they are able or willing to express an opinion at all. Understanding when different forms of linkage matter – and when they do not – is therefore essential for both the study of foreign policy opinion and the broader analysis of public attitudes about international relations.

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Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics of attitudinal items sorted by themes (N=1344).

	Mean	SD	% DNK
Views on Norwegian Russia policy and Norway's relations with Russia			
Norway should have good relations with Russia	3.07	0.76	7.4
Lift all sanctions against Russia	1.40	0.74	9.9
Continue people-to-people ties with Russia	2.77	0.87	32.4
Break diplomatic ties with Russia	2.17	0.96	15.4
Russia's invasion has ruined ties with Norway for generations	3.09	0.79	9.1
Should forbid Russian ships access to Norwegian harbours	3.17	0.86	12.7
Attitudes towards Russians and the Russian regime			
Russians in Norway must distance themselves from Putin	3.23	0.86	10.6
Russians are collectively responsible for the war	2.41	1.04	6.3
Distinguish between regime and ordinary Russians	3.38	0.76	3.3
No reason for suspicion towards all Russians in Norway	2.66	1.01	4.9
End friendship agreements with Russian municipalities	2.65	1.00	20.3
Grant asylum to Russians fleeing mobilization	2.78	0.93	16.8
Russian plays should not be staged in Norway at present	2.10	1.08	14.2
Fear of Russian sabotage in Norway	3.17	0.80	8.2
Russia is a great threat to world peace	3.51	0.69	4.6
The war in Ukraine and its consequences			
Norway must stop sending weapons to Ukraine	1.51	0.82	11.5
Confiscate Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine	3.16	0.94	24.5
The West should send more weapons to Ukraine	3.29	0.88	17.4
Ukraine should give up land to end the war	1.61	0.85	19.2
Sweden and Finland joining NATO is positive	3.77	0.57	6.9
Ukraine should not join NATO	1.78	0.97	22.6
Alignment with the views of official Russia			
The West is largely to blame for the invasion	1.46	0.79	18.8
Russia has legitimate security interests deserving more attention	2.09	1.03	32.5
The USA violates international law more than Russia	2.04	0.92	28.4
Crimea rightfully belongs to Russia	1.38	0.71	31.3
Russia had legitimate reasons to go to war with Ukraine	1.12	0.46	6.5
People in west could learn from Russian family values	1.28	0.61	17.9

Notes: Means and standard deviations are calculated excluding "do not know" responses.

DNK indicates the percentage of respondents selecting the "do not know" option.

For the full wording of the question items, see (Aasland and Myhre, 2024a) (2024)

Table A2. Spearman correlations between linkage variables (N = 1244)

	1. Northern Norway	2. Interest in Russia	3. News about Russia	4. Been to Russia	5. Family/ friends in Russia
1. Northern Norway	1.00	0.04	0.02	0.02	0.01
2. Interest in Russia	0.04	1.00	0.65	0.23	0.15
3. News about Russia	0.02	0.65	1.00	0.21	0.07
4. Been to Russia	0.02	0.23	0.21	1.00	0.09
5. Family/friends in Russia	0.01	0.15	0.07	0.09	1.00

Note: Spearman's rho. All correlations ≥ |0.07| are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Aasland and Myhre (2025) Responding to broken relations: Linkage and Norwegian attitudes towards Russia. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 29–49.

Table A3. Factor analysis, pattern matrix. Factor loadings for the four components (dimensions).

	1	2	3	4
	Geopolitical outlooks	**Ordinary Russians**	**Distancing from Russia**	**Security threat**
Norway must stop sending weapons to Ukraine	**0.72**			
The West should send more weapons to Ukraine	**-0.69**			
Ukraine should give up land to end the war	**0.69**			
Crimea rightfully belongs to Russia	**0.68**			
The West is largely to blame for the invasion	**0.67**			
Ukraine should not join NATO	**0.63**			
Russia had legitimate reasons to go to war with Ukraine	**0.62**			
Lift all sanctions against Russia	**0.62**			
Sweden and Finland joining NATO is positive	**-0.60**			
Russia has legitimate security interests deserving more attention	**0.53**			
The USA violates international law more than Russia	**0.50**	-0.32		
People in west could learn from Russian family values	0.37			
Confiscate Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine	-0.36			0.32
Distinguish between regime and ordinary Russians		**-0.75**		
Grant asylum to Russians fleeing mobilization		**-0.69**		
Continue people-to-people ties with Russia		**-0.63**		
No reason for suspicion towards all Russians in Norway		**-0.52**		
Russians are collectively responsible for the war		0.37		
Break diplomatic ties with Russia			**0.79**	
Russia's invasion has ruined ties with Norway for generations			**0.52**	
Russian plays should not be staged in Norway at present			**0.51**	
End friendship agreements with Russian municipalities		0.38	0.46	
Should forbid Russian ships access to Norwegian harbours			0.39	
Fear of Russian sabotage in Norway				**0.62**
Norway should have good relations with Russia			-0.46	0.47
Russians in Norway must distance themselves from Putin			0.38	0.39
Russia is a great threat to world peace	-0.36		0.33	0.37

Peer-Reviewed Article

From cooperation to containment: Reactions in the Nordic states to Russia's and the United States' Arctic assertiveness

Elena Kravchik, Doctoral Researcher, Doctoral Programme in Political, Societal and Regional Changes, Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Rinna Kullaa, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

Abstract

This article comparatively examines how Norway, Finland, and Denmark have reacted through their Arctic engagement to Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the collapse of the 'Arctic exceptionalism' paradigm. We trace how Nordic states came to consider Russia as an existential threat, necessitating extraordinary measures ranging from Finland's NATO accession to Denmark's abandonment of its EU defence opt-out and Norway's reinforcement of its northern brigades. There is a cascading pattern from domestic securitisation to interstate Nordic cooperation and interregional anchoring in NATO and the EU, as well as global-in-the-region positioning. While convergence on containment is evident, divergences persist in geographical emphases, institutional alignments, domestic patterns and histories. Norway has focused on maritime approaches, Finland on its eastern land border, and Denmark on Atlantic extension via Greenland and the GIUK gap. Nordic securitisation is contributing to the reshaping of Atlantic and Arctic security and the NATO-anchored sub-complex, where unity coexists with nationalised geographies of risk. The future of Arctic security will not be determined by Washington and Moscow alone but will hinge on Nordic agency, especially Norway's dynamic role. Decisions in Helsinki and Copenhagen also now bind regional security dynamics to global rivalries.

Keywords

the Arctic Ocean, Nordic security, sea area foreign policy, Denmark, Russia

Introduction

The idea of the Arctic as a zone insulated from the majority of global geopolitical rivalries was institutionalised at the end of the Cold War through a dense web of cooperative arrangements which began to emerge through environmentalism and climate related cooperation in the late 1970s. The cooperative logic that emerged first in the Baltic Sea area extended to environmental protection and scientific collaboration in the Arctic from the Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy (1991) to the Agreement on Enhancing International Arctic Scientific Cooperation (2017). Together with the creation of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (Kirkenes Declaration, 1993) and the Arctic Council (Ottawa Declaration, 1996), which explicitly excluded military security from their mandates, embodied the idea of 'Arctic exceptionalism.' The argument was that the High North could remain a domain of stability even amid broader geopolitical tensions. As late as 2008, the Ilulissat Declaration reaffirmed commitments of five coastal states — Canada, Denmark, Norway, Russia, and the United States — to settle overlapping claims under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) rather than through confrontation. The 2010 Barents Sea Treaty between Norway and Russia became a landmark of pragmatic boundary-making. Across the Arctic Ocean collaborative structures grew strong through their institutionalisation.

Concurrently, by the end of the 2000's decade, the Arctic political landscape also came to contain latent security undercurrents despite the dominant narrative of cooperation. In the mid-2000s, heightened expectations regarding Arctic resource extraction, emerging accessibility of Arctic shipping routes, and competing continental shelf claims under UNCLOS contributed to the politicisation of sovereignty. These dynamics were accompanied by increasingly assertive security discourses, most visibly articulated in President Vladimir Putin's Munich speech in 2007 and symbolically reinforced by Russia's Arktika-2007 expedition and the planting of the Russian flag at the North Pole. While these developments did not dismantle the cooperative framework of Arctic governance, they generated early securitising signals and reactions among Arctic states, foreshadowing tensions that would later intensify.

The cooperative framework began to erode more visibly after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 while institutions such as the Arctic Council and the Barents Euro-Arctic Council formally continued their work. Growing political mistrust manifested itself through a series of symbolic and practical adjustments, including US and EU economic sanctions against Russia, the suspension of NATO military-to-military contacts, and temporary pauses in joint search-and-rescue exercises. As Alexander Sergunin (2020) notes, this period marked a shift from routine cooperation toward a more cautious and politicised Arctic interaction.

Political representation at the 2015 Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in Iqaluit was downgraded and Russia was represented by the Minister of Natural Resources Sergei Donskoi rather than the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Frameworks such as Finland's Northern Dimension policy, originally established to link the EU, Russia, Norway, and Iceland, continued to function through four partnerships on health, transport, culture, and the environment. Finland also sought to expand Arctic cooperation beyond Europe. Already in its 2013 Arctic Strategy, the government called for intensified collaboration with the United States and Canada to enhance capabilities to operate under Arctic conditions and to secure rapid response in emergencies, noting that "Finnish Arctic navigation skills have also been utilised in North America, particularly in icebreaking" (Government of Finland, 2013, p. 30). During the second half of the 2010s, these partnerships became more strategic, such as Finland´s orientation towards the United States and Canada. They were increasingly more implementation-orientation, focusing on

technical cooperation and infrastructures rather than new politically ambitious projects.

The fact that the United States began to distance itself from earlier multilateral Arctic governance had a significant impact. In his first term (2017-2021) President Donald Trump´s White House began to frame the Arctic as an arena of great-power competition. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Rovaniemi address at Arctic Council Ministerial Meeting in May 2019 explicitly described the region as "an arena for power and competition" (Arctic Council, 2019). No joint ministerial declaration was adopted at the meeting due to US opposition against references to climate change, marking the first time the Council failed to produce a consensus declaration (Polar Connection, 2019). Instead, the ministers signed a joint ministerial statement, a document of less significance, intended to preserve a lesser degree of unity among the eight Arctic states. These developments exposed the fragility of Arctic institutions that had previously been portrayed as a safe haven from geopolitical tensions.

Ruptures deepened after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 to include institutions. In March that year, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and the United States suspended participation in Arctic Council meetings involving Russia, and in September 2023 Moscow formally withdrew from the Barents Euro-Arctic Council. In June 2024, Finland announced its decision to withdraw from the BEAC effectively in 2025 (Government of Finland, 2024b). Meanwhile, Donald Trump's second term as President (2025-2029) has compounded geopolitical uncertainty, reflected in renewed threats to "take control" of Greenland (CSIS, 2025) and further wavering commitments to NATO (Raik, Terlikowski and Baumann, 2025).

In the more than four years of Russia's major war of aggression against Ukraine, political-level cooperation within the Arctic Council has remained suspended, while limited project-level work within select working groups has gradually resumed. This work has primarily taken place in virtual formats and has been conducted on the basis of pre-2022 mandates, with Russia's participation remaining constrained and no new initiatives launched. As Koivurova and Shibata (2023) observe, while political dialogue with Russia has "stopped completely," functional cooperation grounded in law, including fisheries management, frontier-waters arrangements, and global maritime regimes, has continued during the war. What has emerged is a technocratic core stripped of multilateral ambition: a new form of cooperation reduced to legally mandated routines and narrowly circumscribed technical coordination.

The period of Russia´s mass scale invasion of Ukraine affecting most immediately the Black Sea area also exposed the limits of Arctic exceptionalism. Institutions once celebrated as models of pragmatic coexistence have fragmented and found practical functional routines to sustain minimal contact with Russia. At the same time, the Arctic countries that are part of NATO struggle with the prerogatives from the Trump 2025 White House which has refused to rule out military means of invading Greenland (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). An Inter-Nato conflict would be deadly for the alliance. The Arctic's post–Cold War order has thus not collapsed outright but hardened into a minimalist, law-bound coexistence: stable enough to function, yet emptied of its political meaning while in complete flux.

In this rapidly evolving context, the strategic responses of the Nordic states become critically important both in the context of the Arctic Ocean as well as the interconnected Baltic Sea. Yet, they remain understudied. The erosion of Arctic exceptionalism sets the stage for a new configuration of security in which the Nordic states are both Baltic and Arctic emerge as central to the structure of international relations across sea areas. Denmark is a bottleneck state of the Baltic entry to the Atlantic, and Finland NATO´s and EU´s outer extensive land border with Baltic and Arctic Russia. Existing scholarship on Arctic governance and securitisation has either focused on great-power dynamics, especially US–Russia confrontation, or on environmental and Indigenous issues. Extensive analysis of how Norway, Finland, and Denmark redefined their Arctic security strategies after 2022 is missing and relevant questions

Kravchik and Kullaa (2025) From cooperation to containment: Reactions in the Nordic states to Russia's and the United States' Arctic assertiveness. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 50–68.

which Nordic states can help to reveal include: did changes across the Arctic reflect lines drawn already in 2013 or 2014, or before in the early 2000s? And in which order did the security of the Arctic region actually change?

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has prompted Norway, Finland, and Denmark to reframe their Arctic engagement, shifting from cooperative governance toward deterrence and containment. This shift has produced not merely alignment with NATO policy, but a distinct Nordic pattern of Arctic securitisation, in which national strategies function as a collective structuring force within the regional security architecture. While all three states converge in their securitised approach toward Russia, they remain differentiated by geography: Norway prioritises maritime approaches and the Barents Sea, Finland the land border and Arctic military capabilities, and Denmark the Atlantic dimension through Greenland and the Greenland – Iceland – United Kingdom (GIUK) gap. This pattern can be analysed as a Nordic sub-complex, defined as a cluster of states whose security interdependence is stronger internally than externally (Buzan and Wæver, 2003), operating within the broader Arctic Regional Security Complex.

Data and method

This analysis builds on a qualitative corpus of Arctic and security policy documents, white papers, long-term defence plans and official speeches issued between 2022 and 2025, reaching back to 2013 as background. The timeframe begins with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which further triggered the suspension of Arctic cooperation with Moscow, and extends to 2025 in order to capture the consequences of Finland's and Sweden's NATO accessions as well as the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency.

The study focuses on Norway, Finland, and Denmark[1] as three Nordic states whose Arctic security strategies are shaped by distinct geographical exposures to Russia. For Norway, the Barents Sea constitutes the primary arena of risk, combining maritime approaches, offshore resources, and fisheries with long-standing patterns of military monitoring and deterrence. Finland's security perspective is anchored in its extensive land border with Russia, which, after 2022, became fully embedded within NATO's northern deterrence posture and reframed as a frontline of European security. Denmark's Arctic relevance derives less from proximity to Russia than from its Atlantic position through Greenland and the Faroe Islands, linking Arctic security to transatlantic sea lines of communication and the GIUK gap. These differentiated spatial orientations generate distinct national priorities within a shared Nordic securitisation of Russia, illustrating how geographical location structures threat perception and strategic focus within the Nordic sub-complex.

Analytically, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and securitisation theory are utilised to interpret Nordic responses to the post-2022 Arctic transformation. RSCT situates the Nordic states as a sub-complex within the wider Arctic security complex, while securitisation theory explains how Russia has been framed as an existential threat, thereby legitimising extraordinary policy measures (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, 1998). Together, these frameworks link national adjustments to broader regional and systemic dynamics. The analysis does not seek to offer a comprehensive mapping of Arctic security

1 Iceland and Sweden were excluded from this analysis for reasons of analytical focus. Iceland, though a NATO member, occupies a peripheral geographic and strategic position with limited direct involvement in Arctic security vis-à-vis Russia. Sweden, lacking an Arctic coastline and direct territorial proximity to Russia, presents analytical redundancy: its recent NATO accession largely mirrors Finland's trajectory. By contrast, Norway's non-EU status, Finland's transformative strategic shift, and Denmark's geostrategic maritime role offer distinct and complementary perspectives on evolving Arctic security dynamics.

or an exhaustive test of theory. Instead, it identifies the Nordic sub-complex as a distinct arena within the Arctic security architecture and demonstrates how securitisation by small states has become a structuring mechanism in its own right.

Theoretical implications for the Arctic

Recent developments have brought Arctic security dynamics closer to what Regional Security Complex Theory defines as an RSC: "a set of states whose security perceptions and practices are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another" (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, p. 44). During the Cold War, the region was subject to overlay, meaning that superpower rivalry absorbed the Arctic into the global East–West confrontation, leaving little space for autonomous regional dynamics. After 1991, however, cooperative frameworks emerged that deliberately excluded hard security. The Rovaniemi Process (1991) initiated environmental cooperation, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council (1993) institutionalised cross-border governance with Russia, and the Arctic Council (1996) became the central forum for sustainable development, environmental protection, and Indigenous rights.

The 2008 Ilulissat Declaration further consolidated this cooperative order. It reaffirmed the application of the Law of the Sea to the Arctic Ocean, stating that there is "… no need to develop a new comprehensive international legal regime to govern the Arctic Ocean" (Ilulissat Declaration, 2008, para. 4). In doing so, the five coastal states asserted that existing international law, as embodied in UNCLOS and customary practice, sufficed for managing disputes and governance in the High North, and implicitly discouraged proposals for a new Antarctic-style treaty (Winkelmann, 2008).

Northern governments reinforced this de-securitised framing: Denmark's 2011 strategy described the Arctic as "a peaceful area based on international law" (Government of Denmark, 2011, p. 10), Finland's 2013 strategy portrayed it as insulated from global conflict (Government of Finland, 2013, p. 14), and Norway's 2009 white paper stressed cooperation over confrontation (Government of Norway, 2009, p. 37). Occasional disputes, such as the 2010 Norway–Russia maritime delimitation treaty in the Barents Sea or the 1988 US–Canada Arctic Cooperation Agreement, were resolved through legal and bilateral mechanisms.

By the early 2010s, the Arctic resembled what RSCT would term a proto-complex: regional dynamics existed, yet they were defined more by cooperation than by securitisation. A broad strand of scholarship argued that, prior to 2022, the Arctic did not fulfil the criteria of a Regional Security Complex. Among them, Østhagen (2021) offered the most systematic critique. He argued that Arctic security concerns were too unevenly distributed to sustain a coherent complex: for Norway, Russia's militarisation represented an immediate threat, while for the United States and Canada, the region remained peripheral. Moreover, he maintained that Arctic dynamics were largely driven by global rivalries, between NATO and Russia, and increasingly the United States and China, rather than by regional interdependence. With institutions such as the Arctic Council excluding hard security, Østhagen concluded that the Arctic should be understood not as a single RSC, but as a set of subregional logics nested within global power structures. Fakhoury (2023) went further, suggesting that the problem lay in RSCT itself: its state-centric and proximity-based assumptions could not capture the Arctic's diffuse, multi-scalar dynamics. He proposed instead a "security constellation" encompassing non-state actors, environmental vulnerabilities, and external great-power interests. While these concerns and foci have not gone anywhere and remain even more central today, together these critiques reinforced the view that, prior to 2022, the Arctic did not fulfil the criteria of a Regional Security Complex.

Kravchik and Kullaa (2025) From cooperation to containment: Reactions in the Nordic states to Russia's and the United States' Arctic assertiveness. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 50–68.

The post-2022 environment reshaped the Arctic's security architecture in ways that closely reflect RSCT's criteria for regionalisation. Russia's War of Aggression against Ukraine produced a visible '7-versus-1' boundary within the Arctic Council and accelerated the consolidation of the Nordic-Western cluster. Of the Nordic states, Finland and Norway, like Ukraine, shared borders with aggressive Russia. Finland's NATO accession in 2023 and Sweden's in 2024 created a contiguous allied northern flank, embedding the Nordic region firmly within the Euro-Atlantic security complex. Within this framework, defence cooperation under NORDEFCO deepened through joint air surveillance, recurring large-scale exercises, and harmonised operational planning. Exercises such as Nordic Response 2024, mobilising 20,000 troops across northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and Steadfast Defender 2024, NATO's largest post-Cold War drill, exemplified the growing density of integrated operations.

On the opposite side, Russia reinforced dual-use infrastructure and framed NATO's Arctic presence as a strategic threat in its military doctrines, thereby contributing to mutual securitisation. At the same time, the institutional web of Arctic security cooperation expanded beyond the Nordic core. The Arctic Security Forces Roundtable continues to convene senior military leaders for coordination and information-sharing, while NORDEFCO has strengthened its role as a regional framework binding Nordic defence policies. Canada's gradual move toward deeper NATO engagement, alongside the creation of the NATO Centre of Excellence for Climate Change and Security in Montreal, further adds to the institutional depth of the emerging Arctic Regional Security Complex (Bykova, 2024).

Taken together, these transformations satisfy the core variables of RSCT: clear boundaries, polarity, interdependence, and anarchic structure. As Sadurski (2024) argues, the Arctic now constitutes a Regional Security Complex, structured around two interacting sub-complexes: a Nordic cluster (Norway, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, and Denmark as a metropolitan state) and a North American cluster (the United States, Canada, and Denmark via Greenland), with Russia simultaneously internal to the region and functioning as a structural threat. In RSCT typology, this corresponds to a Great Power RSC, defined by the direct presence of global powers: the United States as a superpower and Russia as a great power with supra-regional reach, alongside regional powers whose geographical proximity and institutional integration give them disproportionate influence.

Within this structural setting, the Nordic states have operationalised securitisation in concrete policy choices and official discourse. Finland framed the eastern border as the frontline of European security and described the surge of instrumentalised migration in 2023–2024 as a hybrid attack, justifying the construction of barriers and the full suspension of border crossings with Russia as emergency security measures. Norway's High North Strategy 2025 declared Russia's war "the most serious security situation since the Second World War," legitimising increased troop presence in Finnmark and expanded resilience measures for northern municipalities; the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines became part of a broader discourse linking critical offshore infrastructure to perceived Russian-related security risks. In Denmark, securitising discourse similarly linked airspace violations, drone incursions, and hybrid interference to Russian provocations. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen described the 2025 drone attacks that closed Copenhagen Airport as "the most serious assault on Danish critical infrastructure to date" (Ritzaus Bureau, 2025), reinforcing a perception of Russia as a systemic threat. In Greenland, Chinese investment bids in airports and rare-earth mining (2018–2021) were blocked after Danish and Greenlandic leaders framed them as threats to sovereignty and security, showing how economic dependencies were recast as existential risks. The 2023–2030 Danish Defence Agreement continued this logic by defining offshore wind farms and subsea infrastructure as critical security assets, mandating enhanced maritime surveillance.

Across these cases, Russia is consistently considered as the existential adversary, while hybrid

disruptions and economic vulnerabilities are securitised alongside military threats, reinforcing Nordic alignment with NATO and deepening intra-Nordic cooperation, which operates within the wider Arctic RSC. Together, these processes reveal a dual transformation: at the discursive level, securitisation has expanded beyond the military sector to encompass hybrid and economic domains; at the structural level, these national moves have consolidated the Nordic sub-complex as a coherent regional actor within the Arctic security architecture.

In the post-2022 environment, it is analytically productive to treat the Arctic as a Great Power Regional Security Complex, within which the Nordic states function as regional powers shaping the trajectory of the High North. By embedding their policies in a Nordic sub-complex, we can analyse them not as isolated national adjustments but as mutually embedded responses to systemic shocks. This theoretical framework can guide empirical analysis, focusing on four questions: (i) how the Nordic states justified the suspension of cooperation with Russia within Arctic governance frameworks; (ii) which policy instruments and securitising moves implemented this transformation; (iii) how Arctic concerns became integrated into wider Euro-Atlantic strategies; and (iv) what benefits and stresses emerged within Nordic cooperation. In this sense, the Nordics emerge not as peripheral small states but as pivotal actors whose choices actively reshape the Arctic security order.

Four levels of RSCT

Our analysis follows the four levels of Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan and Wæver, 2003): domestic, interstate, interregional, and global-in-the-region. This framework traces how Nordic securitisation evolved within national settings, deepened through regional cooperation, and became embedded in European and transatlantic security structures, linking the Nordic sub-complex to broader great-power dynamics.

Domestic level

Norway

Norway's domestic securitisation of the Arctic after 2022 represents a decisive rupture in its long-standing balance of deterrence and reassurance from the prerogative of Oslo´s own goals. Norway in the High North 2025 and the National Security Strategy 2025 both describe Russia's war in Ukraine as "the most serious security situation since the Second World War," identifying Russia as Norway's principal threat and legitimising a near-total freeze of cross-border cooperation, leaving only fisheries management, border control, and search-and-rescue as narrowly defined "core interests" (Government of Norway, 2025b, pp. 4–6, 15).

The securitisation of the Arctic is materialised in a historic defence build-up. The Long-Term Defence Plan 2025–2036 and Norway in the High North 2025 strategy together project a doubling of defence spending, expanded brigades in Finnmark, a strengthened Home Guard of 45,000 personnel, and large-scale investments in northern infrastructure, reframing Finnmark as a national readiness zone within a whole-of-society "total defence," where municipal preparedness, civilian logistics, and resilience planning are securitized alongside military capabilities (Norwegian Ministry of Defence, 2024; Government of Norway, 2025b, pp. 22–23).

This approach reflects a long-standing Norwegian doctrine that sovereignty in the High North must be demonstrated through continuous presence, maintaining communities, infrastructure, and state activity in the region (Government of Norway, 2025b, p. 7). Accordingly, the National Security Strategy 2025

Kravchik and Kullaa (2025) From cooperation to containment: Reactions in the Nordic states to Russia's and the United States' Arctic assertiveness. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 50–68.

stresses that sustaining settlement, services, and state presence in Svalbard and eastern Finnmark is vital for safeguarding Norwegian sovereignty and national security. While this principle of 'sovereignty through presence' is not new, its post-2022 articulation has become more pronounced within an explicitly security-oriented logic: population and infrastructure are now framed as instruments of deterrence rather than merely regional policy goals. Demography and local economies thus acquire a security function, serving as tangible expressions of jurisdiction and national resilience.

Recent assessments extend this doctrine from territorial control to the protection of critical infrastructure. The Norwegian Intelligence Service's Focus 2025 report warns that Russia's confrontation with the West includes possible sabotage operations against European energy and communication infrastructure, "which could also impact Norway" (Norwegian Intelligence Service, 2025). Similar concerns are echoed in the PST National Threat Assessment 2025 and the NSM Risk Report 2025, which highlight subsea cables and offshore installations as potential targets of hybrid operations. A series of incidents have reinforced these warnings: in 2022, a subsea cable connecting Svalbard to mainland Norway was deliberately damaged; in 2024, a communications line near Evenes Air Station was severed in an act investigated as possible sabotage; and in 2025, a cyber-intrusion at a dam in Bremanger temporarily disrupted water control systems (Norwegian Police Security Service, 2025; Norwegian National Security Authority, 2025). Together, these events revealed how hybrid threats can exploit the Arctic's sparse infrastructure. In response, Norway intensified surveillance and civil–military coordination across the north, linking energy, communication, and territorial security within a single deterrence framework.

At the land frontier, the Ranger Battalion GSV conducts continuous surveillance and patrols along the 196-kilometre border with Russia, embodying Norway's "presence equals sovereignty" principle (Government of Norway, 2025b). This territorial and infrastructural securitisation is complemented by a societal dimension. The document connects northern population retention to national resilience, highlighting fisheries, renewable energy, and local food production as pillars of sustainable security. Through this combined logic of presence, protection, and resilience, everyday life in Finnmark and Svalbard becomes part of Norway's security architecture: demography, energy, and infrastructure are integrated into a unified system of sovereignty and deterrence.

Finland

At the domestic level, Finland's security policy, which has shaped its Arctic orientation, has undergone a profound securitising shift since 2022, transforming a framework of cooperation into one of deterrence and territorial defence. The 2021Arctic Policy Strategy had portrayed Finland as a "world leader in Arctic ship technology and ship operations," emphasising environmental protection, Indigenous rights, and stability as foundations of its northern engagement (Government of Finland, 2021, pp. 32, 54). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine upended this logic. The 2024 Government Report Policy declared instead that Finland's security now rests on three locks: national defence within NATO, EU membership, and bilateral cooperation with key allies. This formulation marked the end of the integration of the Arctic into Finland's Euro-Atlantic defence architecture. The Arctic and Baltic were recast as a single strategic continuum "inseparable from Euro-Atlantic defence" (Government of Finland, 2024a, p. 8, p. 37).

This reframing redefined Finland's northern identity and territorial logic. The political discourse of wide choices once stated by President Niinistö's remark that "sitting on the fence… [was] quite a good place to be" (2013, cited in Forsberg, 2017, p. 11), now exists only in its remnants as deterrence became more central to national self-understanding. Materially, this transformation was institutionalised at the eastern border and in northern infrastructure. Following Russia's use of instrumentalised migration in 2023–2024 (also used before during the 2015 refugee crises), Finland closed all border crossings and began constructing a 200-kilometre border fence, while also withdrawing from the 1997 Ottawa Treaty

to restore its right to deploy anti-personnel mines. These steps embedded the discourse of existential threat into law and infrastructure, turning the eastern frontier from a site of regulated coexistence into a securitised barrier framed as essential for border preparedness and the security of both Finland and the EU (European Commission, 2024).

In the High North, securitisation has been imagined to be consolidated through NATO's physical presence. In June 2025, seven Allied governments, Denmark, Iceland, Finland, France, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, announced the establishment of NATO's Forward Land Forces, as part of the Alliance's deterrence and defence posture on the Northern Flank (Government of Iceland, 2025). Located in Rovaniemi and Sodankylä, the formation enables rapid reinforcement and integrated operations among Nordic and Allied units, with Finland as host. As the Norwegian Ministry of Defence noted, this enhanced forward presence, the first of its kind in the Nordic region, strengthens NATO's deterrence against Russia and deepens Nordic military integration (High North News, 2025). It thus anchors Allied defence spatially within Lapland, turning geography itself into a strategic asset and institutionalising deterrence within Finland's northern territory.

The Finnish Military Intelligence Review 2025 assesses that Russia is actively conducting intelligence activities in Finland, with particular interest in the activities of foreign forces, developments in defence cooperation, and NATO commands and force structures. It also judges that the threat of sabotage, including against military targets, critical national infrastructure and security of supply, has increased in Finland (Finnish Defence Forces, 2025, pp. 16–17).

Despite Finland's long-standing Arctic engagement, institutional adaptation has lagged behind these strategic realities. The government led by Petteri Orpo (2023-) has neither established a parliamentary committee on Arctic Affairs nor produced a new Arctic strategy beyond the 2021 document (valid until 2030 but greatly altered among other events by Finland joining Nato). This inertia contrasts sharply with the region's growing strategic salience. Rovaniemi lies roughly 415 km by air from Murmansk, close to the bases of Russia's Northern Fleet (headquartered in Severomorsk, Murmansk Oblast), a proximity that underscores Finland's exposure to Arctic security dynamics. Domestically, the National Coalition Party (Kokoomus) dominates Finland's foreign and security policymaking: Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen, and Defence Minister Antti Häkkänen all represent Kokoomus, as do European Commissioner Henna Virkkunen and President Alexander Stubb. Thus, Arctic policy discussions have remained largely embedded in Finland's broader Euro-Atlantic security agenda, with limited signs of institutional renewal since 2021.

In contrast, other Arctic partners have modernised their strategic frameworks following Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, notably the United States' National Strategy for the Arctic Region (2022) and the Department of Defense's Arctic Strategy (2024); Denmark's Foreign and Security Policy Strategies (2022, 2023) and its current chairmanship of the Arctic Council (2025–2027); Norway's High North / Arctic Policy (2025); and Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy (2024).

Taken together, Finland's post-2022 trajectory reveals a paradox: while the country has securitised the Arctic in practice through border control, northern infrastructure, and NATO integration, it has not translated this shift into updated strategic frameworks. The result is a gap between Finland's operational deterrence posture and its formal Arctic policymaking, distinguishing it from its Nordic and North American peers.

Denmark (the Realm)

Denmark's Arctic securitisation is defined by the interplay between Copenhagen and the autonomous governments of Greenland and the Faroe Islands. The Kingdom of Denmark Strategy for the Arctic

Kravchik and Kullaa (2025) From cooperation to containment: Reactions in the Nordic states to Russia's and the United States' Arctic assertiveness. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 50–68.

2011–2020 established the baseline: sovereignty enforcement through visible military presence, via the Joint Arctic Command and Arctic Response Force, combined with multilateral engagement for legitimacy. The Security and Defence Policy Report 2022 reframe this balance, identifying the Arctic and North Atlantic as arenas of "intensified great-power competition" and calling for stronger surveillance and allied coordination (Government of Denmark, 2022). Reflecting this reorientation, Defence Minister Troels Lund Poulsen declared that "first comes the Arctic and the Kingdom of Denmark, then the Baltic Sea and Denmark's immediate areas" (High North News, 2023), signalling a strategic reprioritisation toward the High North.

Greenland's Foreign, Security and Defense Strategy 2024–2033 advanced a co-securitising approach: reaffirming the Arctic as a "region of low tension" while assuming greater sovereignty responsibilities through fisheries control, surveillance, and gradual coast guard development (Government of Greenland, 2024, pp. 41–45). Within the Kingdom framework, it insists that all security measures embed Greenlandic participation and civilian resilience. This principle was institutionalised in Denmark's Arctic and North Atlantic Defence Agreement 2025, a USD 2 billion package funding three Arctic naval vessels, two long-range drones, satellite surveillance, and the upgrade of the Joint Arctic Command in Nuuk, while linking defence investments to local employment and training (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2025). Greenland's representation in NATO through Denmark's Permanent Mission and its aspiration to join the NATO Parliamentary Assembly indicate growing integration into the Euro-Atlantic Regional Security Complex. Yet it simultaneously maintains a peace-centred identity and a low-tension policy, illustrating alignment without subordination.

Since 2024, Denmark has embodied its 'sovereignty through presence' doctrine through Exercise Arctic Light, its largest Arctic manoeuvre to date, held in Greenland's southwestern fjords. Deployments of frigates, F-35s, and special operations units demonstrated both readiness and autonomy, with participation limited to European allies and the deliberate exclusion of US forces. Although Danish commanders emphasise that Greenland faces no direct military threat, defence planning follows NATO's deterrence logic, prioritising readiness over invasion scenarios (Joint Arctic Command, 2025). Yet, limited naval capacity, the ageing THETIS-class vessels, and reliance on US support via Pituffik Air Base continue to constrain Denmark's autonomy (Danish Ministry of Defence, 2022, 2025). This dependency fuels recurring sovereignty anxiety, most visibly reignited by Donald Trump's 2025 claim that "the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity." (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024)

To mitigate dependency, Denmark has sought greater European alignment and Nordic solidarity among the Nordic states. The 2025 decision to procure over USD 9 billion in European-made air-defence systems instead of US Patriots symbolised a move toward strategic independence (Breaking Defense, 2025). Parallel resilience-building measures reflect the same logic: following drone incursions in 2025, Copenhagen imposed airspace restrictions, while the Defence Intelligence Service warned of "a high risk of sabotage" against critical infrastructure (Defence Intelligence Service, 2025). New unmanned maritime systems, including saildrones, were deployed to monitor subsea cables and enhance Arctic situational awareness.

Interstate level

At the interstate level, cooperation among Finland, Sweden, and Norway has undergone a marked transformation since 2022. What was once ad hoc coordination has evolved into structured interoperability anchored in NORDEFCO, which now functions as somewhat of a backbone of Nordic defence cooperation. Under the Vision for Nordic Defence Cooperation (2023), the Nordic states

committed to common operations planning, enhanced situational awareness and air surveillance, joint logistics and military mobility across borders, and total defence coordination linking civilian and military preparedness. These mechanisms have institutionalised shared standards for air and land operations, cold-weather training, and cross-border reinforcement, effectively aligning Nordic capabilities with NATO's collective defence structures (NORDEFCO, 2023; Government of Norway, 2025a).

Cooperation is reinforced through recurring exercises such as Arctic Challenge and Nordic Response, which creates routines. The emerging plan to merge national air fleets into a combined force of about 250 combat aircraft under a joint concept of operations reflects this shift toward collective deterrence. Bilateral and trilateral frameworks deepen this trend: Finland and Sweden expanded operative cooperation even before their 2023 NATO accession, while the 2024 Norway–Finland defence agreement codified twenty domains of enhanced cooperation focused on rapid cross-border mobility and reinforcement. Similarly, the 2025 Denmark–Finland agreement on joint operations extended this logic to the western flank of the sub-complex. The same integrative dynamic extends to mobility and infrastructure, where joint corridor and transport initiatives are aligning national systems with NATO standards.

Complementing military integration, the Nordic states have begun to securitise infrastructure as part of total defence. A joint infrastructure strategy aims to modernise ports, roads, and railways in line with NATO standards to sustain allied reinforcement and close logistical gaps. Building on the June 2024 agreement to establish a military transport corridor across northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland, it enables the rapid movement of troops and equipment through coordinated civil–military planning (Government of Norway, 2024). The corridor institutionalises NATO's west–east logistics line across the High North, turning civilian routes into strategic assets. In May 2025, the Nordic transport ministers issued a joint statement linking transport policy directly to total-defence planning, emphasising cooperation between defence and civilian sectors and the integration of preparedness and resilience into infrastructure governance (Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2025).

Still, Nordic defence integration remains uneven. Norway entered this framework from a long-standing NATO position, equipped with mature infrastructure, host-nation procedures, and integrated command structures. Finland and Sweden, by contrast, have undergone accelerated adaptation since 2023, aligning legislation, interoperability standards, and logistics within a compressed timeframe. Persistent infrastructure gaps between northern Norway and Finnish Lapland, legal constraints on cross-border troop movements, and divergent procurement regimes continue to limit full interoperability.

Concurrently, the cooperative layer of Arctic governance has eroded. In March 2022, seven Arctic states suspended participation in the Arctic Council following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, exposing the fragility of soft-law mechanisms lacking suspension or enforcement provisions (Koivurova and Shibata, 2023). Although limited technical work resumed under Norway's chairship in 2023, political cooperation remains largely frozen. Yet treaty-based regimes endure. Binding agreements on search and rescue (2011), oil-spill preparedness (2013), and scientific cooperation (2017) still function among all eight Arctic states. Likewise, selective bilateral arrangements, such as Norway's annual Barents Sea fisheries quotas and Finland's 1964 Frontier Watercourses and 1959 Lake Inari agreements, maintain channels of pragmatic engagement despite broader confrontation. Together, these dynamics reveal a structural duality within the Nordic sub-complex: while NATO integration consolidates hard-security alignment, the cooperative legal order that once defined Arctic exceptionalism fragments into minimal functionalism.

Kravchik and Kullaa (2025) From cooperation to containment: Reactions in the Nordic states to Russia's and the United States' Arctic assertiveness. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 50–68.

Interregional level

At the interregional level, Nordic security is not merely 'added' to Euro-Atlantic and EU frameworks; it is recomposed by them. Before 2022, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark practised deep de facto integration with NATO and the EU's CSDP while at the same time signalling distance at the level of formal alignment. Crisis politicisation reversed that pattern: when elite preferences and public opinion aligned after Russia's full-scale invasion, windows for rapid formal change opened, ending Sweden's and Finland's non-alignment and Denmark's CSDP opt-out, while Norway, already a NATO member, long informally integrated with the EU's security instruments, and marked by stable Euroscepticism, experienced continuity rather than rupture.

NATO remains the anchor of Nordic defence, "the foundation for Norwegian and allied security" (Government of Norway 2025a, p. 6), but the way Nordic states plug into the NATO–EU interface reflects competing interregional orientations rather than uniform alignment. On one side, Denmark projects an Atlantic–Arctic logic: through Greenland and the GIUK gap it channels allied attention toward North America and the wider Arctic, simultaneously leveraging EU partnerships and its Arctic Council chairship to embed the Arctic within European governance. On the other side, Finland and Norway emphasise a Baltic–High North logic: while Norway remains a core Atlantic NATO state, it increasingly frames the High North as operationally linked to Baltic security through cross-border mobility, reinforcement planning, and the defence of shared critical infrastructure. Together with Finland, Norway thus situates the Arctic and the Baltic as a contiguous theatre for European credibility, pressing NATO and the EU to prioritise rapid reinforcement and military mobility across the Northern Flank. Sweden's accession adds further weight to this Baltic orientation by anchoring Gotland as a forward platform in the Baltic Sea. The result is not duplication but a dual geography of risk, where Nordic security acts as a hinge connecting two different regional complexes: the Atlantic–Arctic and the Baltic–European. Managing this tension has become central to how the Nordic bloc amplifies deterrence from the Barents to the Baltic.

This dual orientation is, for the time being, mediated through the Baltic, which functions as the hinge where Arctic and Euro-Atlantic logics intersect. Institutional wiring across NATO and the EU consolidates this hinge into a shared operational space. On the NATO side, frameworks such as the JEF, the Multinational Division North in Ādaži (with Danish participation), and forward presence initiatives extend Nordic deterrence into Baltic territory while drawing Baltic securitisation logics northward. On the EU side, the Strategic Compass, the Critical Entities Resilience Directive, and Military Mobility 2.0 embed Nordic-style total-defence principles into Baltic infrastructure, linking dual-use corridors like Rail Baltica with reinforcement planning. Finland's accession to NATO further deepens this integration, providing the Baltics with strategic depth and anchoring the High North more firmly within European defence architecture. Together these arrangements institutionalise the Baltic as the key interregional connector, where the Atlantic–Arctic and Baltic–High North orientations are reconciled in practice.

Global in-the-region level

Finally, the EU and Nordic states increasingly project influence into Greenland and the wider Arctic–Atlantic, embedding the region within European strategic logics. The opening of an EU office in Nuuk in 2024 marked the first permanent institutional presence of Brussels in the Arctic, signalling a shift from reliance on Danish mediation to a direct EU–Arctic interface. The simultaneous launch of a strategic partnership with the Kingdom of Denmark on critical raw materials and energy transition situates Greenland within Europe's broader agenda of strategic autonomy and the green shift. Within this broader context of growing EU engagement, Denmark's 2025–27 Arctic Council chairship, led for the first

time by a Greenlandic minister, foregrounds Indigenous rights and climate governance and serves as an additional channel through which Arctic issues are aligned with EU and multilateral policy priorities. These moves illustrate how the Nordics act not only as NATO anchors but also as institutional brokers, translating Arctic concerns into Euro-Atlantic and EU agendas and, in turn, importing EU regulatory and normative frameworks into Arctic governance.

At the global-in-the-region level, Nordic security policy is shaped by systemic pressures stemming from great-power rivalry and the erosion of the international order. For all three Nordic states, Russia is an increasingly aggressive threat. Norway's National Security Strategy 2025 underlines that "the world's largest concentration of nuclear weapons… are situated near our border" (p. 14). Finland's 2024 Government Report follows NATO's Strategic Concept in naming Russia as the most significant and direct threat to Euro-Atlantic security (Government of Finland 2024a, p. 36), while Denmark views Russian revisionism through the Atlantic lens, strengthening sovereignty enforcement and early-warning in Greenland and the Faroes to secure the GIUK reinforcement corridor. Across the sub-complex, Russia is consistently securitised as both a military challenger and the primary driver of global insecurity in the High North.

The United States constitutes a parallel structural pressure, indispensable yet volatile. Signals from the Trump era exposed allied-reliability gaps for small Nordic states, reinforcing strategies of hedging and deeper alignment. The common Nordic logic is to 'keep the US in' while anchoring commitments in Nordic geographies and expertise, a pattern captured by analyses of small-state adjustment and hedging in the region. Norway's offer to host NATO's new Combined Air Operations Centre at Reitan, conditioned on activity being 'anchored in our situational awareness,' exemplifies this calibration; Finland elevates its 1,300-km land border and icebreaking capacity as Alliance-critical assets; Denmark ties US reinforcement to Greenland and the GIUK corridor, reinforcing its indispensability in transatlantic access. Taken together, these moves operationalise a Nordic 'hedging-by-embedding' approach, transforming systemic US volatility into a more stable presence by hard-wiring American power into High North infrastructure and knowledge practices.

China emerges in the Nordic security discourse primarily as a systemic rival in technology, infrastructure, and knowledge production rather than as a direct military threat. Its self-identification as a 'near-Arctic state' and the development of a Polar Silk Road, including research stations in Svalbard and investments in ice-class shipping, embed China in Arctic governance debates. Nordic responses translate these activities into security concerns: Norway restricts Chinese access to ports in the High North, Finland has tightened screening in 5G and data-centre investments and Denmark, under US pressure, blocked Chinese bids to build airports in Greenland. These controversies illustrate how global rivalry penetrates adjacent sectors of infrastructure, technology, and research. This framing is consistent with Nordic security strategies, which increasingly describe China as both an indispensable economic partner and a growing security concern, warranting heightened vigilance in sectors related to technology, infrastructure, and knowledge production (Government of Norway, 2025a, pp. 27).

Legal and institutional frameworks continue to function as stabilisers in an otherwise fragmented order. Norway stresses that "UNCLOS… constitutes the legal framework for all sea areas, including in the Arctic" (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025, p. 15), and Koivurova and Shibata (2023, p. 7) similarly observe that "most treaty-based cooperative frameworks will continue in the Arctic, even if they will likely not be ideally implemented during the time of the Ukraine war." Instruments such as the Polar Code, the Svalbard Treaty, and bilateral fisheries agreements illustrate how treaty law constrains the complete collapse of governance even under systemic rupture.

Yet precisely because these frameworks remain operative, the Arctic also remains unusually open

Kravchik and Kullaa (2025) From cooperation to containment: Reactions in the Nordic states to Russia's and the United States' Arctic assertiveness. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 50–68.

to external involvement. China brands itself a 'near-Arctic state' via the Polar Silk Road, the EU institutionalises its role through the 2024 Nuuk office and Arctic strategy, the UK projects military power through the JEF and Cold Response exercises and Asian powers from Japan to India expand their stakes in shipping and energy. This globalisation of the Arctic confirms that systemic rivalries are not contained regionally but penetrate directly into the sub-complex.

Faced with this permeability, Nordic states respond by positioning themselves as indispensable interpreters of the region within allied structures. Norway claims the role of "a leading and responsible polar nation, with knowledge and idea leadership" (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025, pp. 10–11), Finland emphasises icebreaking and Arctic infrastructure as Alliance-critical assets and Denmark leverages Greenland and the GIUK gap as transatlantic gateways. In this way, Nordic strategies translate systemic volatility into alliance value, producing an epistemic competition over who defines the Arctic within NATO and the EU.

Conclusion

Since 2022, Norway, Finland, and Denmark have not only adjusted to the broader Western strategy of deterring Russia but have also turned their Arctic policies into an independent source of regional security dynamics. The end of the 'Arctic exceptionalism', the idea that the Arctic could remain separate from global rivalries, has failed and led the Arctic away from cooperation to securitisation and militarisation among all Arctic states. Nordic countries have shaped their own sub-regional security complex within the Arctic, unified by a shared perception of Russia as a threat while also wary of the United States, yet still significantly influenced by national priorities and geographic realities.

Empirically, this is visible in how policies differ in focus but converge in instruments. Norway now defines sovereignty through active military presence and protection of critical infrastructure in the north. Finland links the Arctic and the Baltic as one operational space, reinforcing its borders and integrating with NATO. Denmark uses Greenland and the GIUK gap as key points in transatlantic defence, combining symbolic demonstrations of sovereignty with practical surveillance and logistics. Across all three, the military dimension is integrated with civilian security ranging from underwater cables and drones to cyber and energy resilience.

Important asymmetries persist within this convergence. Finland's post-2022 trajectory illustrates a structural gap between practice and policy: the country has securitised the Arctic through deterrence, infrastructure, and alliance integration, yet its strategic framework remains largely unchanged since the 2021 Arctic Policy. This contrasts with Norway's and Denmark's post-invasion revisions of their Arctic strategies and highlights that Nordic securitisation has advanced unevenly, not only geographically but also institutionally.

At the interstate level, defence cooperation among the Nordic states has deepened substantially since 2022. What used to be limited to voluntary coordination has developed into structured interoperability centred on NORDEFCO, which now functions as the backbone of Nordic defence collaboration. Within NORDEFCO, the Nordic states actively exchange assessments and strategic perspectives on regional security, while negotiating agreements on shared infrastructure, transport corridors, and cross-border mobility. These steps have effectively aligned Nordic capabilities with NATO's collective defence structures and strengthened their ability to act as a coherent northern flank within the Euro-Atlantic security complex.

The Nordic countries also play an increasingly important role in connecting the Atlantic and the Baltic-Arctic regions. Rather than losing sovereignty to NATO or the EU, they embed their own expertise and

assets within these institutions: Finland's ice-navigation and Arctic technology, Norway's situational awareness and operational experience, and Denmark's control of key transatlantic routes. In doing so, they turn external uncertainty, including US policy shifts and China's Arctic interests, into manageable dependencies through regional coordination and institutional links.

Theoretically, the findings confirm the usefulness of viewing the Arctic as a Great Power Regional Security Complex, within which the Nordic countries act as regional powers exercising disproportionate influence due to their proximity, dense institutional networks, and high interdependence of security threats. From the perspective of securitisation theory, the key transformation lies in the normalisation of 'extraordinary measures': the shift from political restraint toward the reconfiguration of law, infrastructure, and governance as instruments of defence. The outcome is not militarisation per se, but a broad concept of 'total defence,' in which population resilience, communications, energy security, and logistics become as essential to sovereignty as military forces.

In practical terms, the conclusions are twofold. First, the resilience of the Nordic subcomplex depends on addressing its critical bottlenecks: legal (harmonising cross-border troop movement and export regimes), infrastructural (compatibility of ports, roads, airfields, and subsea infrastructure), financial (long procurement cycles for air defence and major equipment), and political (balancing central and peripheral interests within the Kingdoms and maintaining legitimacy in Arctic communities). Second, the strategic effect of Nordic cooperation will depend on maintaining the region's dual geography of risk as complementary rather than competitive: Denmark's Atlantic reinforcement corridor should continue to serve as the logistical extension of Finland's and Norway's northern-Baltic operational theatre. In other words, the value of the Nordic subcomplex lies in transforming geographic diversity into operational abundance — multiple secure routes, nodes, and monitoring systems that enhance collective resilience.

Kravchik and Kullaa (2025) From cooperation to containment: Reactions in the Nordic states to Russia's and the United States' Arctic assertiveness. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 50–68.

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Discussion Article

The decline of US diplomacy – Implications for US global leadership

Deborah A. McCarthy, Ambassador (ret), Non-Resident Fellow FIIA

Abstract

Diplomacy has been a cornerstone of US global leadership in the post-Cold War era. The Trump Administration has dismantled long-standing foreign policy institutions, sharply reduced foreign assistance, and shifted foreign policy decision-making toward the executive branch. At the same time, it has moved away from multilateralism in favour of a transactional foreign policy centred on personalised presidential diplomacy, bilateral deals, and the use of coercive economic measures. Together, these changes have weakened US global leadership. They have reduced American soft power, eroded global trust, undercut US influence in global norm setting, and diminished the country's ability to monitor and respond to global developments. Although the US continues to have unmatched military power and economic leverage, a sustained withdrawal from development assistance, public diplomacy and multilateral forums, especially on transnational challenges, is likely to accelerate competition over the future rules and norms of the international order. As China rapidly expands its global initiatives and India, Brazil and other BRICS countries press for reforms of international institutions, the liberal character of the global order will very much depend on how US allies and partners take up the reins in response to the US retreat.

Keywords

the United States, diplomacy, soft power, global leadership

Introduction

Diplomacy has been a cornerstone of US global leadership in the post-Cold War era. Through an extensive network of embassies, development agencies, and multilateral engagements, the United States built a formidable network of alliances, orchestrated collective responses to transnational challenges, and played a decisive role in shaping the norms and rules of the global order. Within days of the inauguration, the new Trump Administration moved swiftly to transform traditional US diplomacy, eliminating many key foreign policy institutions and suspending foreign assistance. Returning to an "America First" foreign policy, the changes were accompanied by a retreat from multilateral engagement and a return to bilateral transactional diplomacy privileging the use of coercive economic measures. These measures have eroded US soft power, one of the country's greatest diplomatic strengths, leading to a decline in global trust and a reduced ability to shape international norms and respond to global developments. In response, partners and allies are recalibrating their foreign policies, and competitors are moving in to fill the vacuums left behind.

While similar shifts were attempted during the first Trump Administration, they were met with strong and largely successful Congressional and institutional resistance. They were also proposed via budgetary and management changes which were easily reversed by the subsequent Biden Administration. This time, the Administration has used executive orders, emergency declarations, and institutional closures to consolidate changes and shift foreign policy decision-making to the executive, with little Congressional pushback. And, with likely legislative proposals to codify the changes, the move away from the use of soft power is likely to last a long time. Even with subsequent administration policy reversals and efforts to reinvest in US diplomacy, rebuilding the basic infrastructure underlying soft power will take years. This loss of US leadership will have implications for the global order. What shifts take place will very much depend on how partners and allies take up the reins to protect global liberal norms and how aggressively competitors seek to fill the leadership void.

The dismantling of foreign policy institutions[1]

Within days of being sworn in, President Trump signed a series of executive orders that began the rapid elimination of key government-funded foreign policy institutions which underpinned US soft power projection. Beginning with Executive Order 14169 (2025), the bulk of US foreign assistance was suspended for 90 days, most of the employees of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) were put on leave or dismissed, and the building was permanently closed (Favelle, Nehamas and Tate, 2025).

While waivers were issued to fund some life-saving programs following outside pressure and some court rulings disrupted portions of the freeze, the suspension of the payment system forced most assistance recipients and facilitators to stop programs and reduce staff. The consequences were global. (The Economist, 2025; United Nations, 2025.) The waiver process itself was chaotic: some organisations initially received waivers, followed by termination notices, subsequent reversals, and, in some cases,

1 In this article, the term **"US foreign policy institutions"** is used in a broad sense. It includes key governmental **agencies** responsible for diplomacy and national security (Department of State, the Department of Defense, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the National Security Council). It also includes **other agencies and foundations**, such as the US Agency for Global Media, the Inter-American Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy which advance American objectives abroad through targeted programs and assistance. Finally, the term extends to US government funded **policy organisations**, such as the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars tanks, which shape debate, provide expertise, and influence the formulation of policy

McCarthy (2025) The decline of US diplomacy – Implications for US global leadership. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 69–78.

later notices that the reversals had been issued in error. By the end of February, approximately 10,000 USAID and other State Department foreign assistance activities had been terminated, representing 83 percent of USAID's programs (Foreign Policy for America, no date). Ukraine was particularly affected, losing $1.4 billion (Sanderfur and Kenny, 2025). On July 1, the State Department took over remaining USAID programming.

The Administration then issued additional executive orders to dismantle the agencies and institutions that run development, media outreach, exchanges, and research programs funded by Congress. These included, among others, the Inter-American Foundation, the Africa Foundation, the US Institute for Peace, the US Agency for Global Media (USAGM), and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. These orders were followed, in most cases, with the immediate lockout of all employees and the cessation of all program payments. The closure of USAGM had immediate worldwide effects, as it largely ceased to provide news and information in 63 languages to an estimated 427 million people, primarily in countries with restricted or limited free press freedom (USAGM, 2025).

Many lawsuits have been filed against the executive orders, arguing that Congress established and funded the agencies and programs, and the President cannot cancel them. These lawsuits (Lawfare, no date) have, in a few cases, reinstated limited funding, programming, and employment. The bulk of the court cases are, however, still in process. To consolidate the deconstruction of these government-funded foreign policy institutions, the executive orders were followed by the Rescission Act of 2025, whereby the Administration proposed, and Congress agreed, to rescind $7.7 billion in previous funding. While the Hill debate was vigorous, the only program saved from the cuts was PEPFAR, a George W. Bush legacy global program dedicated to fighting HIV/AIDS. The Act also included cuts to contributions to multinational organisations, including the UN, signalling the Administration's intent to shift away from multilateral engagement. Significantly, the Act effectively codified the elimination of Congressionally mandated programs and institutions via Executive Orders.

The Administration then put forward a draconian budget for FY2026 in the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill (SFOPS). It called for the elimination of funding for additional parts of the foreign policy establishment, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the Asia Foundation, and the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, among others. It also provided for the elimination of contributions to UN agencies and the cessation of funding for multiple decades-old cultural and exchange programs. The budget also proposed a 47.1 percent cut in bilateral assistance and the replacement of other assistance programs by three smaller new funds: the American First Opportunity Fund, a Humanitarian Assistance Account, and an Emergency Fund. Finally, the Administration requested further rescissions and cancellations of previous authorisations. In total, the overall request represented a 79.3 percent cut in the foreign affairs budget from enacted FY2025 levels.

The budget is still being discussed. On January 14, 2026, the House of Representatives approved an appropriations package that included funding for SFOPS at a significantly higher level than the Administration's request but still resulting in an overall 22 percent cut from FY25 levels. The Senate has not passed an appropriations measure and the overall funding process has many more steps. Separately, the Administration is also looking to amend the legislation that governs the remaining foreign policy institutions to cement the structural shift away from soft power and to increase executive authority over foreign policy.

The Trump Administration has also taken steps to permanently reduce the size of the professional diplomatic corps, ensure its fealty to the President, and institutionalise greater political oversight over policy. Via Executive Order 14210 (2025) which mandated the reform of the diplomatic service,

the Department of State has been reorganised and professional personnel reduced. The employee union was eliminated, allowing the imposition of non-negotiated new hiring and promotion rules that call for measuring personal loyalty to the President's agenda (Heckman, 2025). Political oversight of foreign policy has increased via 1) the appointment of senior officials rather than Senate-approved appointees in key positions and the nomination of mostly political appointees as ambassadors; 2) the creation of a new permanent employment category for political appointees in policy positions. Lastly, the Administration has reduced the size of the National Security Council, the body, largely drawn from government foreign policy institutions, that advises the President on national security issues.

During the first Trump Administration, similar efforts were made to restructure foreign policy institutions. Proposals were made to place USAID within the Department of State and to eliminate smaller USG-funded development organisations. Each year, the Administration proposed severe cuts in the foreign assistance budget. Overall, these efforts, however, faced strong pushback from Congress, civil society organisations and national security experts, and most of the proposed changes were not implemented. This time, the Trump Administration is relying on executive orders and emergency declarations to make rapid changes and to expand presidential control over foreign policy institutions while preparing legislation to try to make these changes more permanent.

The return to a personalised, bilateral, transactional foreign policy

The dismantling of foreign policy institutions undergirding soft power and the lack of pushback from the US Congress have meant that foreign policy decision-making lies primarily with the President and a small group of Cabinet members and senior people. Operating with little transparency, controlled media access, and relatively unified messaging (at least among them), the team is carrying out foreign policy through transactional bilateral deals to advance American interests. Key strategies include the use of presidential emergency powers, a reliance on coercive economic measures, a retreat from multilateralism, and personalistic performative diplomacy.

Presidential Emergency Powers: President Trump has declared nine national emergencies, several of which have been used to carry out foreign policy actions that normally would require Congressional approval or extended regulatory reviews (Brennan Center, 2025). These include imposing tariffs on a wide array of countries and using the designation of drug cartels as terrorist organisations to use military force against traffickers. In addition, the President has issued proclamations to advance the Administration's foreign policy agenda, including imposing tariffs on specific products, suspending immigration via the southern border, and establishing an entry ban for citizens from certain countries. Multiple court cases have been filed against these actions. Of note is the Supreme Court decision on February 20, 2026 that the President did not have the statutory authority to impose tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA).

Use of Coercive Measures: The Administration has shifted to using hard power tools, specifically coercive economic measures, to advance foreign policy. Illustrative cases include suspending visas to Colombian officials until Bogota agreed to accept the return of Colombian illegals from the United States; imposing "national security tariffs" on India to pressure it to stop buying Russian oil (Yerushalmy, 2025); threatening tariffs on countries that sell or provide oil to Cuba and threatening to take (unspecified) action against countries adopting the Net Zero Framework, which aims to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions from international shipping. The Administration is also expanding the scope of sanctions, targeting the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court and other

McCarthy (2025) The decline of US diplomacy – Implications for US global leadership. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 69–78.

ICC officials for issuing warrants for Israeli PM Netanyahu and imposing broader sanctions on ships and companies engaged in transporting Iranian oil.

Retreat from Multilateralism: The Trump Administration has withdrawn or plans to withdraw from several international agreements and multilateral organisations that were part of the network of US soft power. These include, among others, the Paris Agreement, the World Health Organization, the UN Human Rights Council, the Global Forum on Migration and Development and the Freedom and UNESCO. Together with proposed or enacted cuts to US contributions to the UN, the WTO, and other bodies, these steps reflect a deliberate disengagement from global institutions and initiatives focused on development, human rights, the environment, and health. The Trump Administration will henceforth engage primarily with the institutions that align more closely with its security and financial interests, such as the IAEA and the IMF.

Personalistic Performative Diplomacy: President Trump is a strong proponent of personalistic performative diplomacy. Intensive personal social media messaging accompanied by choreographed White House meetings in the Oval Office with visiting leaders in front of selected media and elaborate summits are used to demonstrate the President's authority and diplomatic ability to close deals and be a global peacemaker. Often, the event is structured to create performative asymmetry, focusing on the President's dominance in the exchange. While the Administration is not eschewing traditional behind-the-scenes negotiations, the public events have had limited results. The Alaska Summit between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in August 2025 is a case in point: the event was accompanied by ever-shifting Presidential messages on objectives, which caused much anxiety in Kyiv and EU capitals, leading to urgent follow-up visits to the White House. In the end, Putin made no concessions, and Ukraine, the US, and European allies reaffirmed their earlier positions.

While the style and strategies resemble those of the first Trump administration, the current approach relies on different mechanisms designed to cement policy priorities and permanently expand executive authority over foreign policy. In 2019, for example, the administration used a temporary measure to allow the executive to shift funds to build a wall along the border with Mexico. In contrast, the 2025 declaration of a trade deficit emergency seeks to permanently transfer tariff-setting authority from Congress to the President. Similarly, while the first Trump Administration relied on proclamations, administrative steps, and budgetary proposals to scale back US participation in multilateral organisations, the current Administration is pursuing institutional reorganisations, rescissions and likely legislative changes to make the withdrawals permanent. Finally, whereas in the first administration, coercive measures were largely used to extract concessions in bilateral negotiations, they are now being employed to shift foreign policy decision-making away from Congress to the executive.

Implications for US global leadership

The dismantling of US foreign policy institutions and a return to a presidentially driven, transactional foreign policy have weakened US global leadership by diminishing its soft power, reducing global trust, eroding US leadership in norm setting, and diminishing the country's ability to monitor and respond to global developments.

Diminished Soft Power

Soft power, or "the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2017) has been one of the strengths of US diplomacy, helping build strong alliances and coalitions, promoting liberal democratic values, and leading the world's global health and development agenda.

The US government has exercised such power through foreign assistance, media, and education, as well as cultural, health, and scientific programs. By dismantling USAGM, USAID, and other important institutions (the National Endowment of Democracy and the US Institute for Peace, among others), eliminating a large portion of State Department public diplomacy programs and suspending a number of visas for international students and researchers, the Administration is abandoning many important diplomatic tools. For decades USAID, along with other development institutions such as the US African Development Foundation and the Inter-American Foundation served as the primary channels for humanitarian and development assistance, helping build goodwill and projecting US values. Their elimination has disrupted long-standing partnerships with governments, civil society, and local communities and left a vacuum that will be filled by others, notably China.

In particular, the gutting of the US Agency for Global Media and the elimination of other USG-funded information programs managed by USAID and other institutions seriously weakens the ability of the US to effectively communicate its message, to build trust with foreign audiences, and to fight global misinformation/disinformation. The closure of USAID eliminated funding to thousands of journalists and hundreds of non-state news outlets and media-focused civil society organisations dedicated to strengthening independent media. In Ukraine alone, in 2023, USAID was the main donor to 9 out of 10 media outlets that rely on international aid (Fenster, 2025; Weimers, 2025). The EU has provided some short-term initial assistance but has indicated it cannot make up the entire shortfall. A few other governments have promised bilateral funding. But it is still unclear whether there will be any fuller commitment to support media in Eastern Europe. The end of US media initiatives is opening space not only for Russian and Chinese information operations but also for vested local oligarchic interests. China's global news networks, CGTN and Xinhua are already quickly expanding operations in parts of Africa (Clark, 2025).

Reduced global trust

The abrupt suspension of all US foreign assistance, the use of coercive tools, the personalised conduct of diplomacy and the retreat from multilateral engagement have undermined global confidence in America's reliability. This loss of trust damages America's standing as a global leader. Multinational alliances are now viewed through a transactional lens, assessed primarily in terms of their 'return on investment' (ROI) for the United States. As an example, to raise NATO's ROI for the US, President Trump pressed members to increase defence spending and shifted greater responsibility for supporting Ukraine onto Europe.

Conversely, multilateral institutions viewed as yielding low returns have faced sharp funding cuts. Combined with the arbitrary imposition of tariffs on key partners and ever-shifting Presidential positions towards rivals such as Russia and China, these moves have pushed allies to question the value of the US relationship. Many are recalibrating their foreign policies and strengthening ties with each other. Beyond governments, civil society and ordinary citizens abroad have also registered a decline in favourable views of the United States. Public opinion surveys show a notable decrease in the proportion of people who believe the United States will have an overall positive influence in world affairs or who have favourable views of the country (Jackson, 2025; Wike, 2025).

Erosion of US leadership in norm-setting

The Trump administration's actions will erode US influence in shaping international rules and norms. By retreating from cooperative frameworks, the US is ceding space to others to define the rules of the game. This retreat is particularly evident in international trade. The Trump Administration has

McCarthy (2025) The decline of US diplomacy – Implications for US global leadership. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 69–78.

returned to a strategy of imposing tariffs unpredictably (Yeoli, 2025). While intended to rebalance trade in America's favour, the strategy has driven allies and partners to seek new trade relationships that reduce dependence on the United States. The European Union has now signed new trade agreements with Mercosur and India. Canada is reinforcing ties with both Europe and the Indo-Pacific to include a new trade understanding with China. The UK joined the CPTPP, and BRIC members are expanding trade and economic agreements among themselves. Even members of the Quad and AUKUS, while publicly affirming the importance of the security relationship with the US, are actively diversifying supply chains and investing in domestic industrial capacity. Whereas the Trump Administration believes the WTO system as disadvantageous to the US, most other countries, including China, continue to support its framework—though with calls for reform. This isolates the US in debates over the future of the global trading order (Wolff, 2025).

Beyond trade, the US retreat has implications for its leadership in development, global health and the environment. The loss of thousands of USAID programs will reduce the ability of the US to shape local policy environments and cultivate networks of leaders. The cutback in US commitments to global programs will undermine multilateral efforts to coordinate responses to crises, major diseases, and energy transitions. Initiatives such as Spain's Seville conference on financing for development and Brazil's proposal for a new Climate Change Council demonstrate how other countries are stepping into roles once occupied by Washington. The Trump Administration's pullback from human rights and democracy promotion will also have major effects on US influence on liberal norms. The almost total elimination of program funding, offices and teams focused on human rights and democracy promotion signals a shift away from the use of soft power. Without these institutional underpinnings, US influence will decline in debates over internet governance, digital surveillance, civil liberties, and political freedom. This will create space for others, most notably China and Russia, to more vigorously advance governance models that emphasise sovereignty over individual rights.

Reduced capacity to monitor and respond to global developments

The elimination of USAID and significant personnel reductions at the Department of State have sharply diminished the US global diplomatic presence. Cuts extend well beyond the professional foreign service corps to include thousands of career civil servants and locally employed staff, resulting in a sudden and substantial loss of institutional expertise. The absence of USAID officers in embassies across the Global South further weakens US capacity to monitor political and social developments, particularly outside national capitals. At the same time, the Administration has eliminated many recruitment and fellowship programs, which traditionally bring new talent into diplomacy, has imposed loyalty tests for promotions, and has expanded political oversight of foreign policy, factors that will reduce the number of applicants and lead to the departure of experienced professionals.

China, in contrast, is expanding its diplomatic presence, surpassing the US in the number of posts (274 vs 271) and in its footprint in key areas including Africa, East Asia, the Pacific Island Countries and Central Asia (Neelam and Sato, 2024). China also continues vigorously to place its nationals in permanent staff positions in many multilateral organisations. The US' almost complete exit from development assistance both opens opportunities and reduces the cost for rival nations to expand their influence. China is already looking for opportunities. In May 2025, it pledged $500 million over 5 years to the WHO, making it now the largest country donor. And in Africa, where the Trump Administration is considering the elimination of US embassies, Russia is expanding its efforts to offer security assistance to obtain resource deals. Lastly, until the Department of State builds its own development staff and programs, the US will remain constrained in its ability to respond to international crises such as famine, pandemics, or natural disasters, for it has lost USAID's infrastructure. Ad hoc private partnerships or

military-led humanitarian operations do not have the networks or specialised expertise that USAID provided.

Conclusion

The trajectory of US diplomacy under the second Trump Administration marks a profound shift in how the US projects influence and is perceived globally. By dismantling longstanding foreign policy institutions and programs, eliminating most foreign assistance, privileging coercive economic tools, and retreating from multilateralism, the Administration has weakened the foundations of US soft power. Partners and allies are questioning the reliability of the US, and competitors are exploiting the vacuums left behind. Unlike in the first Trump term, the Administration is now taking steps to ensure the changes it is making become permanent through budget and other legislative proposals which permanently eliminate or transform foreign policy institutions, programs and networks. Even with potential judicial interventions and/or future policy rollbacks, the damage is likely to be long-term. The infrastructure that underpinned American soft power engagement has mostly vanished. A future Administration, fully committed to rebuilding soft power diplomatic engagement would need years to rebuild the lost institutional capacity.

The shift, therefore, may be more than a temporary disruption - it may be a turning point in US leadership in the post-Cold War order. Although the US continues to have unmatched military power and economic leverage, a long-term US absence in development, public diplomacy, and multilateral forums on critical transnational challenges is likely to accelerate the global competition for dominance in international order norm-making. With China accelerating the pace and number of its global initiatives and India, Brazil and other BRICS countries advancing reforms of international institutions, the liberal direction of the global order will very much depend on how allies and partners take up the reins in response to the US retreat. Much will also depend on how long they believe the retreat will last. Given that the Trump Administration has another three years to serve and given the uncertainties on the future course of US domestic political choices, it is likely that the absence of US soft power will be protracted.

McCarthy (2025) The decline of US diplomacy – Implications for US global leadership. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 69–78.

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Discussion Article

The return of the Americas and the rise of Norden: The Arctic as a world-shaping space

Lauri Tähtinen, Senior Associate, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Abstract

The Arctic is emerging as a world-shaping space where US hemispheric ambitions and Nordic sovereignty converge. Washington's renewed focus on the Western Hemisphere turns attention northward — including but not exclusively toward Greenland — generating friction with a traditional ally, Denmark, while creating alignment with Finland. Meanwhile, the Nordic Council's institutional promotion of Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and Åland marks a geopolitical shift, stretching Norden across two continents. Although all Nordics now belong to NATO, the rootedness of their different strategic cultures portends a great test for Nordic Unity precisely where the Arctic meets the Americas. Emerging dynamics may also split the European geostrategic space into two, separating the Arctic and the immediate sub-Arctic from the rest of the continent.

Keywords

Arctic Security, Western Hemisphere, Nordic Cooperation, Geopolitics, Transatlantic Relations

Near home or far abroad

Does a superpower start or end at home? To unpack that question: Is it a sign of weakness to concentrate on matters closer to home, or is it a simple recognition of how strength and power are built up? Similarly, the definition of home and how it extends to backyards or shared neighbourhoods differs based on who you ask. That definition and the answers to the preceding questions are at the heart of the debate over the general direction of US foreign and defence policy and, in particular, in debates over the role that the Western Hemisphere plays in the broader picture. Here, even people who think that the Americas should be an important or even primary zone of US security posture can and do differ over specific policy choices. That said, at a time of a major paradigm shift it is very easy to think that those specifics are a concomitant part of the shift. However, it is at least just as — and I would argue even more — likely that we simply lack the tools to analyse and parse through the different policy preferences. What appears as a necessary connection to the uninitiated eye may, under closer inspection, be laden with a range of choices and alternative avenues.

The reasons for confusion are quite human. We can only specialise in so many things and most scholars, analysts and practitioners of international affairs — in the United States and abroad — have focused their sights on issues and regions other than the Western Hemisphere. As one example, one can query how well European NATO allies of Canada have understood the security landscape in the Great White North? For American scholars, who were raised by WWII veterans and other members of the Greatest Generation, a certain globalism had strong ethical appeal: the United States had saved and safeguarded Europe more than once throughout the twentieth century. Such a globalism increasingly came to have not only an ethical but also an aesthetic appeal. We still live in the shadow of such an aesthetic. During the first quarter century of the new millennium, it was common for books on US grand strategy to say very little or nothing at all about the Americas. Grand strategy was primarily for Eurasia or the Indo-Pacific, with some mentions of the African continent. To speak of the Americas would be the opposite of grand — it might even be seen as unbecoming for a superpower with global interests.

It was not always thus. During the nineteenth century, the United States not only expanded and developed interests in its hemisphere but also in the Pacific — from its involvement in the Second Opium War to its conquest of the Philippines. In the first half of the twentieth century the United States simultaneously pursued strong and varying hemispheric policy, while rising to global influence, and premiered collective security in the form of the Rio Treaty.**1** Similarly, at least from the Cuban Revolution in 1959 through the US intervention in Panama in 1989, the hemisphere was seen as part of a global game. It was only in the 1990s — with Cuba still Communist but without its great Muscovite protector — that an image of a global United States in opposition to a hemispheric one began to take form. Certainly, there was the War on Drugs, which in its different forms has been a policy mainstay since the Nixon Years, and it did include US military participation, most notably in Colombia. Yet it never resembled the all-out war that was fought against the poppy-farming Taliban in Afghanistan.

It was precisely to operations such as the long war in Afghanistan, but also in Iraq and more limited conflicts elsewhere, that US policy elites and their interlocutors in allied communities turned their attention. To make an obvious point, the War on Terror mirrors almost perfectly the timeline during which a socialist Venezuela descended into famine and repression, triggered millions of its citizens to become refugees, and, through its cooperation with Cuba, became a hub for powers hostile to the United States. It is this disconnect with US military priorities and its geography to which those who speak

1 See Tähtinen L. (2025) 'Brazil's Split Worlds: Navigating between the Global South and the United States,' *FIIA Briefing Paper* 414, Finnish Institute of International Affairs. Available at: https://fiia.fi/en/publication/brazils-split-worlds.

Tähtinen (2025) The return of the Americas and the rise of Norden: The Arctic as a world-shaping space. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 79–85.

to the importance of the Western Hemisphere often draw their attention. With the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, the resulting conditionality of governance in Caracas, and the growing pressure on Havana, we are beginning to see beyond the contours of, at least, one form of Washington's Western Hemisphere policy. Just as importantly, there is also a different Western Hemisphere beyond the one that lies to the south of the United States in Latin America and the Caribbean: The High North.

During the global Cold War, the Arctic — just like the rest of the Western Hemisphere — had been a site of major contestation as it provided the shortest route for missiles to reach North America from the Soviet Union. After all, the United States is an integral part of that geography due to the location of its 49th state: Alaska. However, as is now apparent, Washington considers all western-hemisphere lands to the north and east of the United States, including not only Canada but also Greenland and, via proxy, Denmark, a zone of grand interest. That proxy relationship, as well as the presence of other areas of Nordic sovereignty in the Arctic, helps explain how the Nordics are increasingly being pulled into a different strategic theatre from that of the rest of Europe. To make matters more challenging, depending on the geography under question, Nordics can and will align more readily. In Afghanistan and mainland Europe the Nordics have, in fact, aligned readily, while on the Iraq War and now the Arctic, alignment is more tendentious. As the Arctic connects Europe to broader US priorities in the Western Hemisphere, we should expect to see greater Nordic divergence in the years to come.

Shades of sovereignty in the Arctic

The Arctic — and the sub-Arctic — is characterised by shades of sovereignty. Complex claims of sovereignty exist based, for example, on the prolongation of continental shelves. The unsettled dispute regarding the status of the waterways flowing through Canada's North is a prime example, as was the Soviet and now Russian presence in Spitsbergen under the Svalbard Treaty. In the former case, there is no formal agreement over status, and even in the latter, when there is a formal agreement, different parties can interpret and instrumentalise it to different and even hostile ends. This means that Greenland, as a site of great power politics, is more the rule than the exception. Simultaneously, in many jurisdictions, domestic progressive politics drive for the incorporation and spread of land acknowledgement practices for the benefit of indigenous peoples. At least for outsiders eyeing territorial prizes, such practices emerge as another front for questioning the sovereignty of the central government.

Such shading or even lacunae are also increasingly celebrated by *Norden* itself. The Nordic Council has taken the lead on the topic, with its recent elevation of the Faroe Islands, Greenland, and Åland to its Presidium. The website of the Nordic Council reflects the new status (published 30 October 2025) with the following statement: "The decision means that the three countries will participate on an equal footing with Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland in the key decisions that shape Nordic co-operation." The designation of Åland as a "country" might surprise or even shock a number of Finns who do not watch the Presidium, the Nordic Council's senior body between the annual sessions. Now "the three countries" partake in the Presidium without an alteration of the Helsinki Treaty, a compromise between those who wanted wholesale change and partisans of the five-country model.

What may from the perspective of Nordic democratic traditions appear as a relatively minor measure is also a fundamentally geopolitical act. The Nordic Council now has a seat for a "country" that lies almost entirely on the North American plate and is by conventional geography considered part of the Americas. By self-admission *Norden* now covers both the northeastern flank of North America and the northwestern edge of Europe. This extension of *Norden* is happening at a time when the Arctic is rising onto world-shaping agendas, making it a primary space for related action. The US decision to

acquire both icebreakers and related technology from Finland speaks to this trend. It also suggests that the different histories, outlooks, and interests of different Nordic countries will come to the fore in a fashion that has not been present for at least a generation if not many.

Washington's current broad conception of the Western Hemisphere – a strongly securitised understanding of it – is one that overlaps with shades of Nordic sovereignty in the Arctic. Most prominently, this sequence has resulted in the resurfacing of an unfinished story of an Atlantic Denmark – one often ignored or even wished away by its Nordic neighbours – with its colonial legacies at times both aligning and clashing with US visions of itself and its security interests. While this is not the venue for doing so, we must recover a fuller understanding of US attitudes towards the Danish West Indies during World War I, the US occupations of Iceland and Greenland during World War II, and the diverging paths of all three spaces thereafter. Only by giving such US presence and partnerships in the Americas and the Atlantic sufficient consideration can we project lessons into Europe. At a time of a resurgent Monroe Doctrine, it is also vital to remember how anti-monarchical it is at its root. Thus far, the only fully independent outcome from the Danish realm is the case of Iceland. At its origin that republic is a creature of twentieth-century US promotion of precisely *republican* self-determination, and an arrangement that Washington in the following decades proceeded to underwrite with military force.

This exposition of *Norden's* Arctic and its interplay with the US and Canadian one is not building up towards any policy recommendations; instead, what has preceded and what follows simply states three things in an extended fashion. First, the expansion of the Nordic paradigm to include the Americas is a momentous decision. Second, such a decision may continue to contribute to the growing acrimony between Washington and its traditional close ally Copenhagen over the shades of sovereignty of Denmark's current and former territories. Third, it is increasingly clear that different Nordics trend in different directions; for example, the robust republican realism of Helsinki and the not-quite-post imperial predicaments of Copenhagen point towards different destinations and related dissension. To put things most bluntly, Washington's and Helsinki's common cause may not always align with the interests of Copenhagen. To understand how and why we need to delve even deeper into the historical record.

From West Africa to the World

In the 1650s, Denmark and Sweden clashed over the control of a West African trading port that later came to be known as the Cape Coast Castle, perhaps the most infamous of European slave fortresses. During the Northern War (1655-1660), this helped trigger warfare between the two Scandinavian kingdoms, resulting in the handover of Scania to Sweden but also the relinquishing of Sweden's Western African possession to Denmark. This reoriented the global projections of the two kingdoms: Sweden was to have *Dominium Maris Baltici*, while Denmark focused on overseas colonies and partook in the transatlantic slave trade. This had its own impact on other Nordic peoples: while Danes colonised the world, the Norwegians — especially once in union with Sweden — came to be known for their exploration of polar regions. Despite having some explorers and colonists of their own, the Swedes mostly focused on their eastern flank. By political and cultural extension, the control of the contested Baltic Sea also became for Finns the key determinant of strategic success.

Here, we must fast-forward for the sake of argument and focus on how this history, and the geography with which it interacts, has resulted in strikingly diverging global outlooks. Over the centuries and even recent decades Copenhagen and Stockholm, and, even more so, Helsinki, developed different strategic cultures. In the aftermath of World War II, Denmark pursued a Scandinavian Defence Union which Sweden ultimately rejected, as it feared it might push Moscow to more fully incorporate Finland into

Tähtinen (2025) The return of the Americas and the rise of Norden: The Arctic as a world-shaping space. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 79–85.

its sphere of influence. Over the years, Nordic misalignment surfaced, for example, as Danish interests in Nordic economic cooperation did not bend to the realities of Finland's relationship with its Soviet neighbour. In the event, when the Danes joined the European Community – in lieu of greater Nordic integration – it also helped carve out vacuums in the process of European integration. Decades later, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, itself a participant in the carving out of exceptions, got sucked into a vacuum. This was a major loss for Stockholm and Helsinki, used as they were to seeing a friend in London, someone with an eye to the realities of the Baltic Sea and the threat posed by Russia. In fact, in the early 2020s, a potential re-approximation with the UK was one of the many factors pushing Finland and Sweden toward Nato.

However, it is not only the Danish colonial but also expeditionary tradition that caused the greatest drift from the worldviews of Helsinki and Stockholm. For a certain generation of Danish leadership, the Iraq War and its associated projects of democracy promotion bore an unmistakable family resemblance to earlier episodes of US underwriting of global order. These included the defence of Denmark's Atlantic sovereignty, its transference to the United States in the Caribbean, and the midwifing of independence for its former possession: Iceland. Within that mindset, expeditionary participation was not a rupture but a reaffirmation of Denmark's place in the US-anchored liberal order. Yet to other Nordics, especially Finland, this alignment appeared less as solidarity than as complicity. The same war that reassured Copenhagen of its transatlantic credentials confirmed in Helsinki the wisdom of restraint. This, then, may have delayed Finland's, and possibly Sweden's, strategic realignment by nearly two decades. It also left behind a more divided continent: the Iraq War caused not only a Western but a European split. Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland found themselves on a different side than Denmark but also the UK, Poland, and Estonia.

Now, the grand-strategic tide has turned in Washington, and, in its corrective, the second Trump administration is willing to assign blame for US expeditionary warfare in Eurasia to both rivals at home and to many of those who used to be considered America's very closest allies abroad. Denmark and its fellow travellers now stand accused of backing earlier US policy – with such an accusation playing a part in a broader attempt to realign overall US global posture and the transatlantic alliance. Such alliance-remaking also means a more confrontational relationship with the European Union, and an interest and willingness to play sides not only between but also within European countries. Meanwhile for Sweden, and especially Finland, it is not only Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine but also the end of one era of US expeditionary warfare that provided the immediate backdrop for Finnish and Swedish Nato membership. As such, they can now shape Nato's meaning in ways that contribute to European self-reliance rather than US-led forever wars. Ironically, the fact that the Iraq War may have delayed Finnish Nato membership leaves Helsinki in a more agile position to shape the Arctic and the immediate sub-Arctic world, with the help of both Finnish technological and tactical know-how.

Conflicting commitments in Helsinki's position

None of the above is to say that Helsinki's position would be an easy one or one that would flow naturally from older commitments. Full military alignment has many benefits that need not be recounted here but it should be underlined how fuller alignment not only exposes one to the forces against which the alignment occurs but also to rifts between one's allies. A newly positioned country discovers both new and renewed friction. Finland's grand strategy in the post-1945 world was to remove itself from the Baltic nexus of Molotov-Ribbentrop, and for this Nordic cooperation was the most plausible gateway. Meanwhile, in that world, greater open cooperation with the United States would have threatened to unleash forces that would lock Finland in Baltic servitude. It is notable that the push to sell Finnish

icebreakers and related technology to the United States dates to the years of deepest Finlandization. That period of time was also the heyday of Nordic cooperation and US-Danish military cooperation in the Arctic. Different divisions allowed for different partnerships and alliances.

This is not to say that the US-Danish settlement of the past decades was ever a clear-cut relationship. Washington had expressed interest in purchasing Greenland several times in the years that followed World War II — to follow the model of the West Indies, if not that of independent Iceland. Now that Washington is reassessing US military presence around the world, while re-focusing on homeland defence and broader hemispheric affairs, the case of Greenland, whose defence has been a US responsibility for many decades, is a canary in the coal mine of transatlantic relations. A return to a Cold War era, US-led force posture faces new headwind, including the recovery of a longer trajectory of US strategic thought. The image of US boots on the ground helping a European monarchy hold onto the pre-postcolonial phase of its history in the Western Hemisphere is not one to ingratiate itself with today's Washington. This is the case even before one highlights the importance of Greenland in terms of mineral wealth or for US designs for hemispheric air defence.

This means that US pressure on Denmark, part and parcel of its hemispheric and Arctic shifts, and the Finnish economic and strategic interest in assisting the United States in this shift make for complex politics. It may very well be the case that in the future it is the Arctic that maintains primary US interest in deterring Russia, while non-Arctic Europe is expected to bear the brunt of its own defence. Once the Arctic emerges as a world-shaping space, as Europe once was *par excellence*, prior alignments will also shift. It also generally raises geopolitical stakes in the Arctic while diminishing them elsewhere in Europe. Europeans may recognise this from how they would often applaud US anti-communism in Europe, while deploring similar stances in the Caribbean basin or in East Asia. This is to say that the countries in the very north of Europe may soon find themselves exposed to a different geopolitical logic and valuation than most of the continent. This is because the logic of the Arctic, as an extension of the Western Hemisphere, looks to push aside its competition further south on the European continent.

New spaces, new arrangements

For Finland and Sweden, the logic of Washington's interest in Greenland highlights the defence of Åland — another of the Nordic Council's new "countries" and unlike the others, also demilitarised. One of the reasons that any superpower's turn to its own neighbourhood triggers concern in its neighbours is that their behavioural patterns can be mirrored by other great powers. Russia's neighbours feel the pressure of such a logic more heavily than most others. While neither party has a direct stake in the status of the remnants of Denmark's Atlantic empire, they have a strong indirect interest in it, not just in terms of broader principles of international law but in the shades of sovereignty that define the Arctic space and *Norden. They also simply share a major stake in Washington's general turn towards the Arctic, both as an extension of its concern for the Western Hemisphere and more independently.*

For years, many parties, both in the United States and in Latin America, lamented the lack of Washington's interest in the future and broader development of the lands to its south. After seeing the form that US interest in the region is taking, some are clearly elated – especially those who have had the misfortune of living under the despotic regime in Caracas or been driven abroad by it. Others have come to regret ever hoping for increased US interest in its affairs and would readily return to what many now see as benign neglect. Relatedly, the Nobel Committee granting its Peace Prize to the most powerful figure in the Venezuelan opposition provides a point of overlap between the two geographies. To explore that parallel further, it can be said that what is true for Latin America is just as true for the Arctic. The Nordic countries have long hoped for more US interest in the Arctic to counterbalance

Tähtinen (2025) The return of the Americas and the rise of Norden: The Arctic as a world-shaping space. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 79–85.

Russia's presence. Yet, Washington's push to integrate Greenland into the United States is so difficult for Nordic leaders and publics to stomach that it is nearly impossible for them to contemplate what it might mean for them. It would certainly make the US an Arctic power but this shift in Washington's strategic balance would also bring the United States closer to being a European power than ever before.

To return to our initial question: does a superpower start or end at home? Whichever direction the response flows, a qualified answer would have to recognise that for a superpower its neighbourhood can extend surprisingly far and wide. And in the case of the United States this conception may well encompass much of the Arctic that does not belong to Russia. Such a conception is bound to create friction where there was little before and provide foundations for coalitions which would have been difficult to imagine in the past. Superpower interest in a region is a force that does not leave previous arrangements or attitudes untouched. Also, the lessons learned and precedents set in one space shall soon shape the broader world. First the Arctic, then the world.

Discussion Article

Towards total defence and security: Threats IN, TO, and THROUGH the North American and Nordic Arctics

Nicholas Glesby, Ph.D. Student, School for the Study of Canada, Trent University; Administrator, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN); Student Fellow, Centre for Defence and Security Studies, University of Manitoba

Ryan Dean, Assistant Professor, Royal Military College of Canada; Coordinator, North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network (NAADSN)

Abstract

The IN, TO, and THROUGH methodology categorises threats affecting the circumpolar Arctic. Scholars such as Lackenbauer, who developed the methodology for the North American Arctic, and Østhagen, in applying it to the European High North, identify and categorise different threats that fall under the broad umbrella of 'Arctic Security'. Comparing the European High North with the North American Arctic, we observe that the sub-regions face shared and distinct pressures, with kinetic and "hybrid" threats TO the High North presenting less risk to the North American Arctic. The subregions share common IN threats driven by climate change, as well as THROUGH threats driven by strategic competition and technological change. Our commentary gestures to areas of common alignment on "total defence" and comprehensive security approaches, as well as opportunities to bolster strategic deterrence and political stability in a region that is no longer viewed as exceptional.

Keywords

the Arctic, the North America, Canada, Europe, security, defence

Introduction

Scholarship investigating Arctic security from just over a decade ago focused on climate change opening the region to global actors and influences concerned with natural resources and shipping routes that could disrupt local ways of life. Arctic security was framed as one region dominated by human security concerns driven primarily by climate change. Since then, new approaches have broken down this 'one Arctic' and the drivers animating it, such as the "in, to, and through" methodology. This method notes that geopolitics is the primary driver of threats for Arctic security, but that they vary according to where in the region. Our reading of this suggests that the North American Arctic must deal primarily with threats passing through it, while the European High North must be more focused on addressing threats in and to it. P. Whitney Lackenbauer developed his "in, to, and through" methodology in 2020 to detangle the generic concept of 'Arctic Security'" (Dean, 2020). The opaqueness of this idea led many commentators to conflate it with other concepts such as human, national, or international security, causing them to speak past one another when discussing the topic (Lackenbauer, 2021). Lackenbauer's goal was to clarify drivers and detangle threat dynamics in Arctic security studies. Originally designed to interrogate levels of analysis, the framework breaks the circumpolar Arctic into a series of geostrategic theatres or sub-Arctics. He then applies a methodology of categorising threats from inside these regions, oriented to these regions, or passing through them.

Threats *in* the Arctic originate within the region and are oriented towards it. An example of a threat in the Arctic is a cruise ship running aground, requiring a search and rescue response that could overwhelm the capacity of a local community. Threats *to* the Arctic are those that emanate from outside but are targeted to region itself. Examples include a hybrid attack on critical Arctic infrastructure vital for early-warning or surveillance that originates outside the Arctic. Threats passing *through* the Arctic originate outside of the region but pass through or over it to strike targets also outside of it. For example, a ballistic missile from Russia would likely pass through the North American Arctic before striking a target in continental Canada or the United States.

Some threats can also fall between the in, to, and through categories of the framework. Climate change is caused by activities from the south and can thus be a threat to the Arctic, while regional and local climate dynamics in the region, such as extreme weather, can be classified as an in threat. What is important is that this framework provides a conceptual exercise around threats that can help to determine appropriate scales rather than wrapping them all together into 'Arctic security.' For example, the threat of climate change to the Arctic can be addressed through multilateral mitigation measures, but climate threats in the Arctic are best dealt with through local adaptation. It also helps distinguish what driver is behind the threat, such as geopolitics or climate change.

Østhagen also expressed frustration with many observers who asserted that the Arctic was a political region on the precipice of geopolitical competition and conflict despite low tensions and continued cooperation. Østhagen sought to explain why, despite growing turmoil between Russia in its bilateral relations with other Arctic states, and its inflaming of geopolitics, the Arctic seemed insulated from these tensions – that it was somehow exceptional. Drawing on foundational work by Kenneth Waltz, Østhagen shifted the levels of analysis up from the individual to the national, regional (Arctic), and international level of analysis, thus aligning with Lackenbauer's work. Østhagen saw this as continuation of David Singer's classic level of analysis problem, with him viewing the Arctic as a "good" region trapped between the "bad" of international politics, and the downright "ugly" bilateral politics between the Nordic states and Russia (. The central question was how much could the Arctic as a good political region be insulated from the bad and ugly events happening elsewhere Østhagen, 2024)?

Russia's renewed 2022 invasion of Ukraine greatly undermined the notion of Arctic exceptionalism. The cooperation of the Arctic as a political region was damaged, with many fora ending or curtailing their operations, most notably the Arctic Council (Andreeva & Rottem, 2024). By 2023, Østhagen and Lackenbauer were collaborating on mapping the new security dynamics across the Arctic and how it fit into domestic and international politics (2023). This commentary provides a comparative analysis of threats *in, to,* and *through* the North American Arctic and European High North, which both have different geographic, political, and cultural considerations which analysts must account for when discussing threats to Arctic security.

North American Arctic

IN: Threats in the North American Arctic tend to fall on the safety and security side of the spectrum of threats. This means that government departments and agencies other than the military lead responses to "these" threats such as environmental or humanitarian disaster response, search and rescue, espionage, organised crime, and other illegal activities. The Canadian Armed Forces are often uniquely positioned to provide support given their logistical capacities in "this" sparsely inhabited "region" characterised by a dearth of infrastructure. The effects of climate change on infrastructure also have implications for domestic military operations in the region.

Adversaries often seek to exacerbate and exploit North-South and Indigenous-State divisions through disinformation campaigns. For example, longstanding inequalities in transportation, energy, communications, employment, community infrastructure, health services, and education continue to disadvantage Northern residents compared to the South. Poor socio-economic and health indicators also point to significant gaps between northern Canadian communities and their southern counterparts, explaining higher rates of human insecurity in the Canadian North. This is one of many ways the information domain can be weaponised as a threat in the region.

TO: Threats to the North American Arctic can include precursors to broader attacks through the region. For example, critical military infrastructure, such as early-warning sensors and surveillance architecture for NORAD's aerospace warning, aerospace control, and maritime warning missions, is located throughout Alaska and the Canadian North. An adversary would seek to disrupt or destroy this infrastructure, undermining all-domain situational awareness, to damage the American or Canadian militaries' ability to operate in the sub-region, and undermine their abilities to detect, deter, and defend against threats to the continent. Such attacks are inherently linked to paving the way for threats travelling through the sub-region.

Climate change creates new challenges with associated permafrost thaw, coastal erosion, wildfires, and melting ice for the North American Arctic. Furthermore, the region is inherently tied to globalisation and growing interest in large-scale development of natural resources. This means more activity in the Arctic, ironically driven by the perception that climate change is opening the region to new actors.

The increasing prevalence of hybrid threats and tactics below-the-threshold of armed conflict poses myriad security challenges to the North American Arctic that demand the engagement and response of various governments, rightsholders, and stakeholders. These include interference in critical infrastructure (including information systems), the use of fishing vessels as cover for intelligence gathering and other malign activities, and marine scientific research as a platform for dual-use science and intelligence collection. Other threats include lawfare, cyber-attacks, and academic espionage originating from outside the region. Chinese acquisitions of mining operations at strategic locations or as part of a global strategy to control resources and critical mineral value chains also pose a threat to the North American Arctic. Lastly, threats include 'tourists' using drones and photography to gather

Glesby and Dean (2025) Towards total defence and security: Threats IN, TO, and THROUGH the North American and Nordic Arctics. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 86–94.

information about specific locations.

THROUGH: Threats through the North American Arctic have historically fallen within the remit of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which has defended against bomber and missile threats approaching from the North since 1957. The binational command is the cornerstone of the Canada-US defence relationship. Current North American defence modernisation efforts have amplified the debate about the nature of Arctic security in Canada and implications for policy and investment. In 2020, then-NORAD Commander General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy argued that "geographic barriers that kept our homeland beyond the reach of most conventional threats" no longer guarantee North America as a "sanctuary," and "the Arctic is no longer a fortress wall … [but] an avenue of approach of advanced conventional weapons and the platforms that carry them." O'Shaughnessy insisted that "Russia has left us with no choice but to improve our homeland defense capability and capacity. In the meantime, China has taken several incremental steps toward expanding its own Arctic presence" (O'Shaughnessy, 2020).

NORAD modernisation includes layering new sensor and defeat systems and improving the reach and mobility of the American and Canadian militaries in the Arctic. NORAD highlights the importance of advanced sensors that can detect, track, and discriminate advanced cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, hypersonics, and small uncrewed aerial systems, including the platforms that carry these weapons. Accordingly, hardening the North American shield will enable projection of a credible deterrent against conventional and below-the-threshold attacks through the Arctic.

Greenland (Kalaallit Nunaat) is geographically North American, sharing a sense of place, culture, and tradition with Inuit in Nunavut, northwest Alaska, and coastal regions of Russia on the Bering Sea. Additionally, Greenland is home to vital early-warning and surveillance sensors for threats passing through it to deeper into North America. US Pituffik Space Force Base houses a ballistic missile early warning radar, space surveillance capabilities, in-flight refuellers for the Eastern Canadian Arctic, and supports resupply for Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Alert.

In June 2025, US President Trump issued an executive order moving the eastern boundary of US Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) to include Greenland, which had previously fallen within European Command's area of responsibility. "In a sense," Canadian commentator Andrea Charron (2025) notes, "Greenland is now in USNORTHCOM's front yard whereas it was in EUCOM's backyard." The change makes sense operationally, given Greenland's geographic proximity to North America. However, Greenland's role in continental defence has been compounded by President Trump's threats to annex Greenland, with the new US National Security Strategy outlining the "Trump Corollary", which vows to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere (White House, 2025). In January 2026, Trump declared that the US must own Greenland. "It is vital for the Golden Dome that we are building," the US president insisted, and "if we don't do it, Russia or China will take over Greenland, and we're not going to have Russia or China as a neighbour" (Henley & Roth, 2026). It was not until the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos later that month that Trump ruled out the use of force to take Greenland and agreed to a framework deal brokered by NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte that seeks to meet US security demands while protecting the sovereignty of Greenlanders (Kola, 2026).

The detect, deter, defend functions of NORAD are integral to the global US goal of achieving integrated deterrence. Furthermore, Alaska holds the northern approaches to the continent, where detecting threats from Russia and the People's Republic of China that would pass through the North American Arctic as far away as possible is critical to defence. Given the flight trajectories for advanced strike weapons, threats to continental security through the North American Arctic are growing in scope, providing more options for Russia and China to hold the continent at risk in the event of conflict in

their spheres of influence. This threat reality makes NORAD modernisation a top priority for continental defence planners, with the Arctic region a key theatre for strategic defence-in-depth.

European Arctic and High North

IN: The European Arctic and High North face significant threats driven by geopolitics in Europe. Østhagen notes how northern Norway and Finland share borders with Russia, with strategic Russian forces just across the frontier on the Kola Peninsula (Østhagen, 2024). The European High North thus faces a wide spectrum of threats ranging from hybrid warfare to invasion. For example, Russia had stationed a marine regiment and motor-rifle brigade along the Norwegian border in the early 2010s, possibly to seize the northern coast as part of a larger Bastion Strategy designed to protect their nuclear ballistic missile submarines of the Northern Fleet and maintain a deterrence by punishment capability in the event of general war. However, fears of partial invasion have diminished as Russia redeployed those forces to Ukraine and has not reconstituted them as that war grinds on. Finland and Sweden formally joining NATO, thus expanding the border along which Russian forces would be needed, compounds the challenge for the Kremlin's Arctic defence posture (Bouffard et al., 2025).

This suggests that threats in the European High North will be mostly focused around below-threshold hybrid tactics and, should kinetic conflict erupt, long-range precision fires. The shift in emphasis from the Northern Fleet to the Leningrad Military District suggests that Russia is reorienting from using these hybrid and kinetic threats in support of offensive operations towards more of a defensive posture (Nilsen, 2024). On this higher end of conflict, long-range fire from the Russian Arctic into the High North would likely seek to eliminate Nordic strike fighters, command and control installations, radar, and anti-submarine warfare platforms such as maritime patrol aircraft and ships. Finland and Sweden joining NATO, as well as heightened Nordic defence cooperation, increases defence-in-depth and dispersion of forces, which help to mitigate the threat posed by Russian long-range fires.

Russia continues to deploy hybrid tactics in the European High North to accomplish two objectives. The first is to create uncertainty in local communities, undermining their resilience. Second, hybrid tactics provide a venue for Russia to engage in strategic messaging to the Nordics and beyond of dissatisfaction with certain policies and actions, ramping up the threat of conflict. Global Position System (GPS) jamming in Northern Norway and Finland, cyber-attacks, the cutting of seabed fibre-optic cables, drone incursions, and mounting information influence operations are prime examples. Outside of a more general war in the region, we anticipate that hybrid warfare within the region will continue to be Russia's preferred coercive tool in the European High North.

Human security threats in the European High North are not as salient as those posed to the North American Arctic. Both subregions face substantial pressure driven by acute climate change, roughly four times faster than the global average. However, the European High North is much more resilient to this change due to substantially higher infrastructure supporting this smaller and more densely populated subregion.

TO: Russian capabilities based outside of its Arctic can be projected to threaten to the European High North. For example, Russia can use additional disinformation, cyber, and electronic capabilities to achieve hybrid warfare objectives in the region, while long-range aviation, cruise missiles, and hypersonic glide vehicles based deep within Russia bolster its long-range fires deployed in the Arctic. Lastly, while ground forces stationed in the Russian Arctic have been depleted since 2022, Russia could bring in additional forces to its borders in the European High North to limit Nordic freedom of action and disrupt NATO resupply and reinforcement in the event of kinetic conflict.

Glesby and Dean (2025) Towards total defence and security: Threats IN, TO, and THROUGH the North American and Nordic Arctics. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 86–94.

THROUGH: Threats through the European High North are aimed deeper into Europe or into the North Atlantic, which represents a strategic sea lane of communication between the continent and North America. Russia continues to invest heavily in long-range fires, including nuclear-tipped long-range systems to which the Kremlin attaches tremendous value for prestige and deterrence. While an extreme-case scenario, conventional long-range fires from Russia could pass through the European High North to strike at infrastructure in Denmark and the southern parts of Finland, Norway, and Sweden.

Russia has not only made significant investments in developing new long-range fires, but also new submarines and ships to carry them. While these vessels could pose a threat to navies and shipping in the North Atlantic, they are heavily outnumbered by NATO. In the event of conflict, they are likely to remain within the Russian Bastion to defend their second-strike capability and fire their long-range weaponry from this stand-off position into the North Atlantic. These weapons would be supplemented by land-based weapons, drones, and unmanned underwater and aerial vehicles.

Common alignments between North American and the European High North

IN THREATS: Geopolitically driven kinetic or hybrid threats are more acute in the European High North than in the North American Arctic. Instead, the shared threat in both subregions is posed by climate change. Because the threat is well beyond either subregion to address directly, they are left with developing new ways of locally adapting to the effects of climate change. The local adaptations help to build societal resiliency across the North American Arctic and the European High North and sharing these methods could benefit both subregions. However, the North American Arctic is colder, far more sparsely populated, and lacks much of the infrastructure that can be found in the European High North. This could affect the adaptation options available compared to the European High North.

TO THREATS: The European High North and North American Arctic do not share much common alignment on the kinetic threats posed to them. This is largely due to the disparity of military forces and infrastructure stationed between the two subregions. Rather, alignments exist around responding to hybrid warfare and disinformation campaigns, as well as climate mitigation measures.

While minimal greenhouse gases are emitted in either subregion, the southern parts of Canada, the United States, and the Nordics are relatively high per capita polluters. Cooperation between these states on reducing their overall emissions below internationally agreed to standards – while politically unlikely – could, in theory, help to mitigate the threat climate change is posing to both the North American Arctic and European High North. Ultimately, stopping this threat will require a global response that geopolitics is currently thwarting.

The increasing prevalence of hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns creates a multitude of shared security challenges to both the North American Arctic and the European High North. While hybrid warfare poses more of a threat to the European High North while disinformation plagues the North American Arctic. The sharing of intelligence and experience with both modes of mobilising disinformation, as well as hybrid tactics between both subregions could help to bolster their resiliency to both threats to them.

THROUGH THREATS: The most in common threats that the North American Arctic and European High North share are the ones that would pass through both subregions. These are across the full spectrum of threats, from cyber to subsurface and aerial drones, through the gauntlet of cruise missiles and glide vehicles, and culminating with nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles. Both Lackenbauer and

Østhagen emphasise that these weapons are all geostrategic in orientation, or at the international level of analysis, and have little to do with drivers emanating from Arctic regional dynamics (Lackenbauer 2021 & Østhagen, 2024).

The threats through both the North American Arctic and European High North are predicated on the geographic realities of the regions sitting along the great circle route, the shortest avenue of approach from one hemisphere to the other. Russia poses the 'proximate' threat to both subregions, with advanced strike weapons in the aerospace domain aimed deeper south into North America and Europe to target vital economic, industrial, critical infrastructure, or military sites. These targets could include financial hubs in metroplexes, strategic industries, infrastructure nodes for telecommunications or electricity, or a depot supporting military operations. Detecting these through threats as far away as possible provides ample time for decision-makers to consider all non-kinetic and kinetic options at their disposal.

Lackenbauer and Østhagen suggest these through threats have geostrategic end goals not implicitly tied to Arctic or regional security considerations (Østhagen and Lackenbauer, 2023). Instead, the region is home to critical early-warning and surveillance infrastructure to detect launches as fast as possible. To achieve space and time to counter through threats, former NORAD/USNORTHCOM Commander Glen Van Herck outlined this process in three parts: 1) all-domain awareness through sensors and systems from subsurface to space and cyberspace for complete battlespace awareness; 2) information dominance through a cloud-based computing system using artificial intelligence and machine learning to quickly display and disseminate data quickly to decision-makers; and 3) attaining decision superiority, providing seniors leaders with non-kinetic options to dissuade or diminish competitors' objectives with "proactive measures made possible with the expanded decision space." This three-part strategy allows for the NORAD/USNORTHCOM Commander to deter in competition, de-escalate in crisis, and defeat in conflict, as critical infrastructure can increasingly be targeted to draw attention away from global theatres as a distraction (Van Herck, 2021).

In North America, this surveillance architecture is being modernised through Canada's commitments to upgrade NORAD. This includes new Arctic and Polar Over-the-Horizon Radar (the former to be based on the Australian Jindalee Network) to replace the North Warning System, a classified Crossbow sensor network, and the Defence Enhanced Surveillance from Space project will include a new synthetic aperture radar to improve upon Canada's existing RADARSAT and Epsilon 1 and 2 projects. The US is also updating its long-range surveillance radar with the installation of the Long-Range Discrimination Radar (LRDR) in Clear, Alaska, and is currently assessing options for four new Homeland Defense Radars in the northwest continental United States.

Early-warning and surveillance systems in the European High North include national and NATO components. Norway, Sweden, and Finland all utilise ground-based radars, with Oslo and Stockholm purchasing the Lockheed Martin TPY-4 designed to detect, track, and classify aerial threats from UAS' to ballistic missiles. Norway is developing microsatellites for maritime surveillance and is collaborating with the US on a satellite station at Andøya Air Station in Northern Norway to detect cruise missile launches. Similarly, Finland has signed a letter of intent to acquire a satellite for surveillance and identification. Additionally, Norway participates in NATO's Airborne Early Warning & Control Force program with an E-3A Sentry forward-based at Ørland Air Station. Sweden has ordered up to four SAAB GlobalEye which, in addition to its AEWC function, has electronic and signals intelligence functions. Denmark, in partnership with the Faroe Islands, is exploring a Faroese air warning radar and drone surveillance positioned towards the Greenland-Iceland-UK (GIUK) gap. At the same time, the four Nordic nations are deepening air force cooperation to enhance situational awareness and joint planning,

Glesby and Dean (2025) Towards total defence and security: Threats IN, TO, and THROUGH the North American and Nordic Arctics. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 86–94.

command, training, and exercises through the Nordic Airpower Concept (NAC). Achieving all-domain awareness and real-time surveillance serves as a combined force multiplier.

The North American Arctic and European High North are increasingly linked in a global threat environment with advanced weapons systems via the North Atlantic. Indeed, this connection is bound through the establishment of NATO Joint Forces Command Norfolk which is responsible for patrolling the sea lanes of communication and resupply from Florida to Finnmark. The North Atlantic also serves as a maritime chokepoint for launch platforms from the Russian Bastion to strike either continent with strategic delivery systems that would pass through the Arctic: a Cold War-era threat that has re-emerged with the proliferation and development of advanced long-range strike weapons.

Conclusion

Russia's illegal and unjustified invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ended the idea of the Arctic as an exceptional region separate from the geopolitical drivers that affect the rest of the world. Cooperative governance institutions have been strained or suspended, and analysts have grappled with how 'Arctic security' fits within international and domestic political considerations. The in, to, and through framework for analysis has enabled Lackenbauer and Østhagen to tackle the empirical evidence of the 'who, what, where and how' that informs preconceived notions and ideas labelled as 'Arctic security'.

The framework allows for a deliberate and careful analysis and examination of distinct sub-regions of the Arctic, each with their own geographic, political, and cultural contexts. This framework also helps distinguish what driver is behind the threat, such as geopolitics or climate change. These drivers influence policy decisions and responses within the broader context of the international system's effects. The framework also suggests that the circumpolar Arctic is far more susceptible to a crisis outside of it erupting but spilling into the region.

Both subregions have similar through threats, though the scale of the threat is far more of a concern for the North American Arctic. If a general war were to erupt, Russia's deterrent is largely based on its ability to strike through the great circle route at a wide range of targets across North America. Given the proximity of Russia to the High North, the region could face a deployment of the full spectrum of threats from disinformation through hybrid tactics to land battles and even nuclear strikes. In North America, to threats include the targeting of critical infrastructure which enables global power projection that could serve as a precursor to attacks through the region. Far more likely are disinformation campaigns to the region that will sow division and reduce resiliency to escalating conflict. Ultimately, the North American Arctic must deal with through threats while the European High North faces threats to and in its Arctic.

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Discussion Article

Strategic allies or Nordic outposts? Comparing US and Nordic perspectives on Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs)

Joel Linnainmäki, Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Abstract

In recent years Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have signed or updated bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCA) with the United States. These agreements were presented as enabling deeper defence cooperation with a strategic ally in a severely deteriorated European security environment. The agreements provided strategic flexibility for increased US presence in Northern Europe. However, rather than signalling unique relations between the Nordic countries and the United States, they should be seen as an extension of America's overall strategic approach to military presence and cooperation with allies and partners in Europe. For the Nordic countries, the implication is that they cannot insulate themselves from political risks in the transatlantic relationship.

Keywords

Defence cooperation, DCA, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, NATO, Norway, USA

Introduction

In recent years four Nordic countries – Norway (2021), Sweden (2023), Finland (2023) and Denmark (2023) – have signed and ratified bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) with the United States. (US Department of State, 2025) These agreements have been widely welcomed by Nordic governments as supplementing NATO's Article Five security guarantees and as symbolising strong bilateral relations with the United States at a moment of heightened threat from Russia and increased uncertainty in the transatlantic partnership.

However, this discussion article argues that the Nordic DCAs do not represent a unique relationship between the United States and the Nordic countries, which would insulate them from political risks and transatlantic turbulence. Rather, they are an extension of broader US European strategy and thus their implementation is impacted by shifts in US strategic thinking over issues such as military basing and global force posture.

The article begins with a short overview of the significance of Defence Cooperation Agreements in interstate relations. The article then compares domestic discussions in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden regarding bilateral US-Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements. Finally, the article assesses how the Nordic DCAs fit into the overall US European strategy and analyses possible implications for the Nordic countries. The article provides the first extensive analysis of the Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements, their surrounding domestic debates, and the US strategic perspective.

Defence Cooperation Agreements in interstate relations

In the past three decades, Defence Cooperation Agreements have become one of the primary legal frameworks for interstate defence cooperation. The number of DCAs has increased rapidly, with some 2000 such agreements signed since the 1980's. While the contents of the agreements vary, they have several connecting features. The agreements provide an overall legal and technical framework for regular defence cooperation, for example joint exercises, procurements, information exchange and Host Nation Support (HNS). Kinne (2020) defines DCAs as "formal bilateral agreements that establish institutional frameworks for routine defense cooperation." Simplifying Kinne's formulation, I define DCAs in this article as interstate framework agreements facilitating defence cooperation.

One reason for the increasing popularity of DCAs in interstate relations is that they provide an alternative to formal alliance agreements. (Kinne, 2020). They do not contain formal security guarantees or legal obligations for military support or coordination in case of invasion. This allows countries to deepen practical defence cooperation and signal externally about close bilateral relations while avoiding associated costs of formal alliances, such as collective action problems and entrapment or abandonment risks. However, while there has been increasing interest in the use of DCAs in interstate relations, there has been little research on the use of DCAs between allied countries.

The United States has increasingly come to utilise DCAs in the overall management of its global alliance network and force posture. Considering the extent of American military presence and commitments around the globe, American military planners have an interest to harmonise and simplify regulations and legal frameworks governing its access to allied and partner territory and facilities. (Salonius-Pasternak, 2024.) In practice, this has meant insisting on uniform clauses in its Defence Cooperation Agreements. These include, for example, clauses on the entry and status of US forces in a host country, taxation, criminal jurisdiction and ownership of infrastructure built by US forces. In Europe, the primary legal function of DCAs has been to modernise the 1951 NATO Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)

Linnainmäki (2025) Strategic allies or Nordic outposts? Comparing US and Nordic perspectives on Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs). *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 95–104.

on a bilateral basis. After ratification, DCAs are often complemented with separate implementation agreements on specific technical topics, such as infrastructure or taxation.

Comparing the Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreement debates

In all four Nordic countries, governments argued that the DCAs would strengthen cooperation with a key strategic ally, the United States. In the two NATO founding nations, Norway and Denmark, the agreements were presented as deepening and modernising long-standing historical cooperation. The Danish government argued that the agreement would also allow Denmark to take more responsibility for European security. (Government of Norway, 2022b; Ministry of Defence of Denmark, 2023b; Parliament of Denmark, 2025a.) For Finland and Sweden, the agreements were framed differently, presented as natural extensions of their recent accession to NATO. Specifically, the Finnish government highlighted that the DCA would complement and reinforce Finland's national defence efforts. (Parliament of Finland, 2024a; ibid, 2024b; Government of Sweden, 2024.)

The primary justification given for the agreement was the unpredictable and deteriorating security environment in Europe. In Norway and Finland, the two countries bordering Russia, governments emphasised that the DCAs would enhance their capacity to receive support, enable US investments into local military infrastructure and facilitate joint planning. (Government of Norway, 2022b; 2022c; Government of Sweden, 2024; Parliament of Finland, 2024a; 2024b; Ministry of Defence of Denmark, 2023b; Parliament of Denmark, 2025a.) Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen contended that existing uncertainty in US-European relations made closer cooperation even more crucial, specifically to hedge against a scenario where the US might disengage from Europe (Bryant, 2025). After Donald Trump's election in 2024, more emphasis was placed on the agreements also facilitating regional cooperation by creating a coherent joint approach to security and defence in Northern Europe.

In Norway, Sweden and Denmark, the agreements were approved with clear parliamentary majorities, and in Finland the final approval was unanimous after several amendments were voted down. In all four countries the primary criticism came from left-wing political parties. In Norway the Socialist Left (Sosialistisk Venstreparti, SV) and the Red Party (Rødt, R), in Sweden the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet, V) and the Green Party (Miljöpartiet, MP), in Finland the Left Alliance (Vasemmistoliitto, Vas.), and in Denmark the Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten, EL) and the Alternative (Alternativet, ALT) party. (High North News, 2024b; Parliament of Sweden, 2024b; Parliament of Finland, 2024c; Parliament of Denmark, 2025a.)

Critical political debates centred largely on two key themes: the potential loss of sovereignty and the risks associated with nuclear weapons. Critiques concerning sovereignty highlighted the dangers of ceding control over national territory and, specifically, waiving criminal jurisdiction for US forces. Active debates occurred in all four countries regarding the risk of nuclear weapons being placed or stockpiled on their territory, though with different emphases. The Norwegian and Danish agreements include a clause respecting existing national policies regarding bans on the stockpiling or deployment of nuclear weapons. In Finland, the agreement referred to respecting national legislation, which currently bans the placement or stockpiling of nuclear weapons. Sweden was an outlier, as its agreement does not explicitly refer to national legislative or policy restrictions on nuclear weapons. In all the countries critics argued that existing restrictions did not go far enough.

Specific national concerns were also raised. In Norway, opposition parties were critical of weakening traditional Norwegian policies on the ban of permanent foreign bases during peacetime. In Denmark, critics saw it as a mistake to deepen cooperation with an unreliable and unpredictable USA at a time when the Trump administration was raising tensions over Greenland. In Norway and Denmark, there

were also concerns about the agreements causing increased tensions in relations with Russia. In Finland, critics raised the risks of waiving jurisdiction over criminal cases where the death penalty could be involved. Another concern was the parliament's right to receive information on the implementation of the agreement. (Parliament of Norway, 2022; 2024; Parliament of Sweden, 2024a; Parliament of Finland, 2024b; 2024d; 2024e; Bryant, 2025; Parliament of Denmark, 2025b; 2025c.)

In response, governments argued that the DCAs fully respect national sovereignty and would not alter existing policies or legislation restricting US activities. While jurisdiction would be waived in criminal cases regarding US forces, governments retained the right not to waive jurisdiction under certain conditions. Any American activities would only take place with full political consent. The Danish government further contended that the DCA, rather than causing a loss of control, would clarify the legal framework governing US presence. Governments also asserted there was no need for new legislation or stronger clauses outlining national restrictions, including those on nuclear weapons, as any American activities would only take place with political consent. This was bolstered by the Swedish government's assurance that any changes to restrictive policies would require political consensus, and the Finnish government's statement that legislative changes would require parliamentary approval. (High North News, 2022; (Government of Norway, 2024; Parliament of Sweden, 2024a; Parliament of Finland 2024b; 2024c; 2024d; 2024e; Parliament of Denmark, 2025b; Parliament of Denmark, 2025c.) However, in a historic shift, the Swedish and Danish Prime Ministers refused to rule out the possibility of nuclear weapons being placed on their territory in wartime, thereby creating strategic ambiguity about potential policy changes in the future (Sveriges Radio, 2024; Pröschold, 2025).

A key element of the DCAs was the establishment of Agreed Areas and Facilities designated for the joint or exclusive use of American forces. Sweden and Finland adopted broad-based models, opening 17 and 15 areas respectively. Originally, Norway agreed to open 4 additional military areas for the use of American forces. However, after more far-reaching commitments by Sweden and Finland, it amended the total number of new areas to 12. Denmark, in contrast, chose a narrower path by identifying only 3 areas. However, this agreement notably included an explicit reversal of its 1953 policy restriction banning the permanent placement of foreign forces or bases. The change is not applicable to the Faroe Islands or Greenland. The overall result was an unprecedented level of access to Nordic military infrastructure by the American military. For Norway, this served as an early indication that, following Swedish and Finnish memberships in NATO, Norway would no longer be able to regulate allied presence in Northern Europe alone. The newer member states, Sweden and Finland, saw the Agreed Areas and Facilities as crucial for creating a long-term framework for US presence and investments into national military infrastructure, rather than relying on ad hoc solutions during a crisis. (High North News, 2024a; Parliament of Sweden, 2024b; Parliament of Finland, 2024a; Ministry of Defence of Denmark, 2023a; Parliament of Denmark, 2025b.) For Finland, geographic and strategic concerns over a long-shared border with Russia and logistical reliance on the Baltic Sea made enhanced US engagement and presence especially urgent (Linnainmäki, 2023).

Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements in US European Strategy

From a strategic perspective, the Nordic DCAs allow the United States to reassure allies in a deteriorated and unpredictable security environment, strengthen NATO's regional deterrence and defence and facilitate US force projection in Northern Europe and the European Arctic. However, the Nordic DCAs should be seen as part of an overall American effort to secure access to allied military sites and facilities for logistics and power projection. The United States has concluded or updated DCAs with all countries

Linnainmäki (2025) Strategic allies or Nordic outposts? Comparing US and Nordic perspectives on Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs). *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 95–104.

on NATO's eastern and northeastern flanks from the European Arctic to the Black Sea. This happened in three waves. First with Romania and Bulgaria in 2005 and 2006, then with eastern NATO allies after the annexation of Crimea, and finally with old and new Nordic allies as part of an overall response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.[1]

The result has been an incremental shift of American military presence from Central Europe to Easten Europe. In Poland, the US has been building a stronghold for regional presence. In 2023, US Army V Corps headquarters were moved to Poznan. (Nicastro & Tilghman, 2024; Badertscher and Moreno-Riano, 2024). In Romania, the US is investing up to 2,7 billion USD to Mihael Kogălniceanu Air Base with the aim of expanding it into a regional air hub for power projection and logistical support (Tanghe, 2025). Overall, however, the American approach in the eastern flank has been characterised by a lighter, more reflexive and responsive footprint, rather than relying on traditional vast military bases and permanent force (Carlough, Harris and McGowan, 2025).

The Biden administration viewed the Nordic DCAs in terms of strengthening cooperation with like-minded allies. The US viewed the Nordic countries as capable allies acting as regional security providers. The agreements were presented as further enhancing interoperability and practical military-to-military cooperation. They also emphasised that taken together the European DCAs form a broad network of Defence Cooperation Agreements reaching from Northern Europe all the way to the Black Sea. Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine and joint US-European efforts to respond provided the context for the agreements. (US Department of War, 2021; US Department of State, 2021; Clark, 2023; US Department of State, 2023; US Department of War, 2023; US Embassy in Finland, 2023; US Embassy and Consulate in the Kingdom of Denmark, 2023.)

From a practical perspective, the agreements provide the US with wide access to Nordic military bases across all domains. Based on this unprecedented US access to Nordic military areas, practical cooperation in all domains is likely to expand. However, the extent of increased US presence in Northern Europe is regulated by several factors. First, the US views the Nordic countries as capable allies practising self-help, rather than security-consumers in need of a large-scale permanent or rotational US presence. Second, air and maritime capabilities, which have previously been the focus of US cooperation with the Nordic countries, are more mobile and logistically easier to shift between theatres than land forces. As US global strategic priorities turn away from Europe and toward security concerns in the Indo-Pacific and its own hemisphere, as stated in the new 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), there is a growing risk that at least some air and maritime capabilities will be removed from Europe. Finally, since the end of the Cold War, American doctrine has shifted away from new large-scale permanent bases toward an access-based model relying on rapid reinforcements. This trajectory appears poised to deepen during Donald Trump's second term. Further, as part of ongoing Defense Strategy (NDS) and force posture reviews, the Trump administration is currently assessing potential adjustments and reductions to the US military posture in Europe. (Bergmann and Svendsen, 2025; Tanghe, 2025; Lungescu, 2025.) All of this means that the United States currently sees little strategic or military need for a large-scale permanent presence in Northern Europe

1 US has made or updated DCA agreements on the northeastern flank with Romania (signed December 2005, entered into force July 2006), Bulgaria (signed April 2006, entered into force June 2006), Lithuania (signed January 2017, entered into force February 2017), Latvia (signed January 2017, entered into force April 2017), Estonia (signed January 2017, entered into force July 2017), Hungary (signed April 2019, entered into force August 2019), Poland (signed August 2020, entered into force November 2020), Slovak Republic (signed February 2022, entered into force April 2022), Norway (signed March 2021, entered into force June 2022), Czech Republic (signed May 2023, entered into force September 2023), Sweden (signed December 2023, entered into force August 2024), Finland (signed December 2023, entered into force September 2024) and Denmark (signed December 2023, entered into force July 2025).

This has several implications for the Nordic countries. The experiences of NATO's eastern allies imply that attracting and building up US military presence is arduous and takes time even when strategic interests align. US military presence in Europe is still largely positioned in legacy bases in Western Europe. Expanding US presence on the eastern flank has happened only partially and incrementally. This means that the Nordic DCAs are unlikely to bring large-scale permanent or long-term rotational US presence into Northern Europe. Attracting US investments into Nordic military infrastructure will likely also take time. For the United States, Northern Europe is not currently a priority theatre. On the other hand, bureaucratic inertia and 10-year duration clauses in the Nordic DCAs also somewhat cushion against political turbulence in the transatlantic relationship by providing a long-term perspective for military-to-military cooperation. However, considering the ongoing shift of US strategic priorities away from Europe, the Nordic countries should not approach the DCAs as insurance against worst-case scenarios such as a sudden large-scale drawdown of US presence in Europe. Rather, they should actively make the case to Washington that defence cooperation serves US global strategy by ensuring that NATO's deterrence toward Russia holds and America is not drawn into a regional war in Europe.

Conclusion

This article has provided the first extensive comparison of Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, Swedish and US perspectives on the Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements. The Nordic DCAs were negotiated in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as well as Finland and Sweden acceding to NATO, which meant that the Nordic countries shared a joint threat perception of Russia. Critical debates in all four countries centred on loss of sovereignty, risks of nuclear weapons being placed on their territory and a changing relationship with the United States.

For the Nordic countries, the DCAs facilitated the creation of a unified operational area in Northern Europe as well as a joint Nordic approach to defence cooperation with a strategic ally. In other words, in an unpredictable and deteriorated security environment, the Nordic countries considered NATO's Article 5 security guarantees as insufficient on their own.

For the United States, Northern Europe acts as an outpost for power projection into the European Arctic and the Baltic Sea region. The Nordic countries are seen as capable allies and security providers and the DCAs created strategic flexibility for increased US presence in Northern Europe in support of regional deterrence efforts. However, the main direction of US defence efforts in Europe will remain in Central and Eastern Europe. Rather than signalling a unique relationship between the Nordic countries and the United States, the Nordic DCAs should be seen in the context of these broader US strategic efforts in Europe.

Linnainmäki (2025) Strategic allies or Nordic outposts? Comparing US and Nordic perspectives on Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements (DCAs). *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 95–104.

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Discussion Article

The urgent and the important: A conceptual matrix of US policy prioritisation

Cordelia Buchanan Ponczek, Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Abstract

This article sets forth a preliminary conceptual framework for understanding how the United States prioritises policy engagement across competing domestic and international demands. Adapting the Eisenhower Matrix, it categorises policy issues along two dimensions – importance and urgency – while situating decision-making within constraints of time, financial resources, public opinion, and elite tolerance for pressure. The framework provides a descriptive tool for analysing how prioritisation unfolds. The article highlights how institutional dynamics, political incentives, and the pressures of the contemporary attention economy shape the assignment and contestation of urgency and importance. It also considers how media cycles and amplification through social media can elevate issues perceived as urgent or important while obscuring less visible but strategically significant priorities. By structuring policy debates within four quadrants of urgency and importance, the framework offers a means for tracing how issues move across categories and why certain policies receive attention or resources. In doing so, it provides analysts with a systematic tool for interrogating US policy choices and the competing visions, constraints, and narratives that shape them.

Keywords

US, governance, public policy, contestation, strategy, media

Introduction

People are naturally inclined to seek tools to make order out of chaos. Such tools offer opportunities to put things in their proper place. The hope is that some meaning or pattern might emerge once items are set in a more structured manner. Similarly, the brain seeks out heuristics as shortcuts to streamline thought and conclusions. This phenomenon is something esteemed researchers such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky have written about at length and to great success, possibly because people enjoy reading and learning about their own heuristic tendencies (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974). This inclination appears to be true of the US public and of the global public and leaders, too.

The United States is operating in a moment of pressure on multiple fronts. Policymakers and leaders are required to prioritise engagement across myriad theatres, discern how to balance domestic topics and international commitments, and choose between what are being framed as core security interests versus peripheral matters. These trade-offs are shaped by finite resources of time and money along with electoral incentives, public opinion, and elite tolerance for discomfort. All of this is unfolding amidst the dynamics of the attention economy in the social media era – an information environment where media cycles press urgency and shorten decision windows, and where the spotlight on a brief crisis can overwhelm and undercut long-term strategy. This simultaneously obscures and reinforces how many disputes in US policy can be distilled into how urgency and importance are assigned as a part of wider US visions.

To contribute to this debate, this article reinterprets the Eisenhower Matrix as a conceptual framework for categorising and prioritising issues in US foreign and security policy under political and institutional constraints. This builds on Dye's classic definition of policy as a choice (Dye, 2017). The article's contribution and the setting forth of the matrix is not prescriptive in dictating what the United States should prioritise; rather, it is descriptive, in that it examines the parameters for how prioritisation unfolds. The framework is useful in that it provides an organisational foundation to understand how judgments of "importance" and "urgency" are constructed, contested, and rationalised in practice by stakeholders.

Background: The Seven Habits and the Origin of the Eisenhower Matrix in Personal Management Techniques

The Eisenhower Matrix's two variables are importance and urgency. Its origin is reportedly from a quote attributed to former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower: "I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent." The Eisenhower Matrix was popularised in the best-selling personal-management book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Steven R. Covey (1989). In his book and presentation of the matrix, Covey establishes the fundamental aspects of the matrix and the properties of its components.

In the matrix, the X-axis (vertical) represents the variable of importance and the Y-axis (horizontal) of urgence. There are four resulting quadrants.

Ponczek (2025) The urgent and the important: A conceptual matrix of US policy prioritisation. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 105–115.

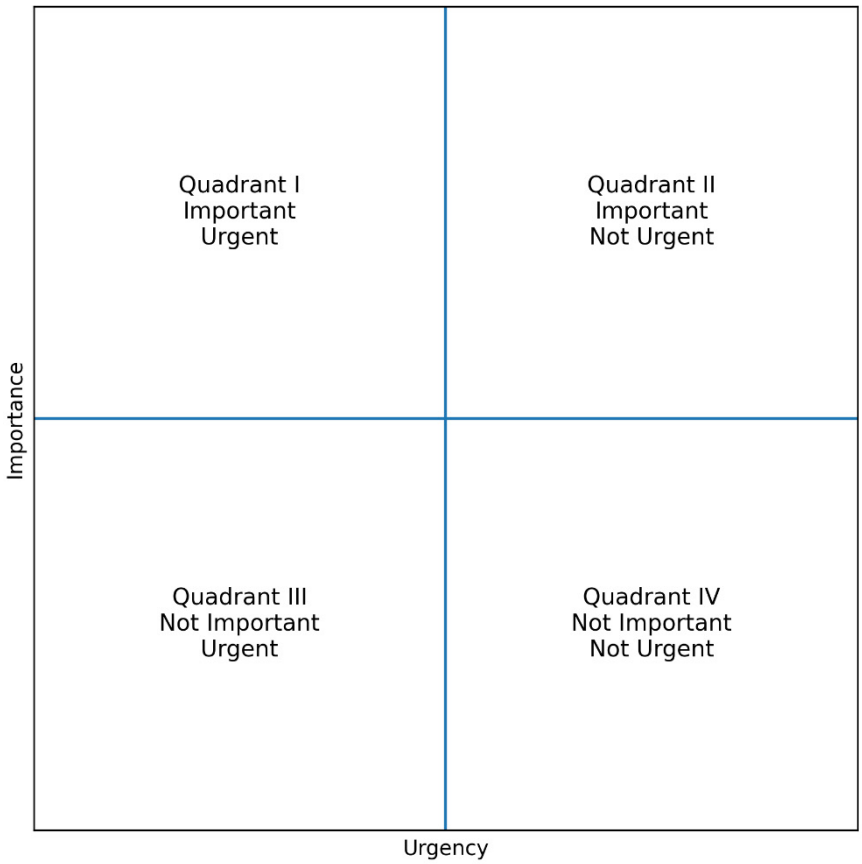

Figure 1. The Eisenhower Matrix, based on Covey (1989, p. 151).

By Covey's definition, "[u]rgent means it requires immediate attention" (1989, p. 150), and he writes that "[u]rgent things act on us." He provides the example of a ringing phone and posits that even if a person had spent many hours preparing for a meeting, that same person might be derailed by the sound of their phone ringing, and almost instinctively respond by picking up the phone. Further, Covey notes that urgent topics typically are visible, "[t]hey press on us; they insist on action" (ibid., p. 151). He notes their popularity with others, presumably on account of this visibility, which results in pressure to complete them. Responding allows an actor the satisfaction of having undertaken the task, of having participated, of having done their part. To reinforce this, Covey ends that urgent items are usually "pleasant, easy, and fun to do" (ibid., p. 151). But, he warns, such items usually lack real importance.

This is because Covey contrasts urgency with importance, which is focused on results. Covey puts the importance of importance on its intersection with a person's "mission", "values", and "high priority goals" (1989, p. 151). Here, a distinction is raised between urgency and importance: items that are urgent usually entail a *reaction*, whereas items that are important usually entail "*initiative*" and "*proactivity*" (ibid., p. 151; emphasis added). The risk is that actors will be drawn by the allure of the quick-fix reward and visibility of responding to urgent items, when actors must have a clear idea of what is important, which is driven by a cultivated vision of results or things one wants to contribute to or impact over time. This causes a dilemma, because resources are finite and require trade-offs.

The United States, despite its status as a global superpower, is constrained. It has limited resources and must choose how and when to allocate those resources. The list of resources that one could enumerate is long, so guardrails must be set. In this discussion of importance versus urgency for priorities of

engagement, the following are selected to be of note: time, money, public approval, and elite tolerance to pressure. These constraints mean that the US government, through its three branches, its political leadership, and its foreign policy establishment, must decide how to manage its resources.

Time includes short-, medium- and long-term. The short term is the amount of time that the US has to reply to a given action, whether that be in response to domestic or international pressure. The medium-term incorporates election and budget cycles as useful benchmarks for policy feedback and pressure. The long-term considers effects of second- and third-order implications that must be considered as an action (or lack of action) develop over time and others respond. While there are benefits to keeping the status quo, or of inaction, there are also issues that might appear to be unimportant but whose neglect results in a long-term sub-optimal situation. This could slowly drain US resources or evolve rapidly to become important and urgent. In either case, complacency or failing to account for the evolution of a situation over time risks higher costs in the end.

Money is the availability of funds and the ability to raise and spend financial resources. Consideration should be given to several elements here. First, the US faces a budget approval process, which impacts policymakers and public opinion. Second, the United States has a growing deficit problem, which introduces political and public opinion constraints. Relatedly, the question of raising more funds through tax policy is a highly contentious domestic policy debate. And finally, on the most basic level, money spent in one area cannot be spent elsewhere: this is a mutually exclusive resource.

Public opinion applies primarily to the US, but it can be widened to include an international audience. Only US citizens can vote their leaders in or out of office, in part based on what they perceive to be a responsible allocation of finite resources in pursuit of US vision and goals. These visions and goals are relative and dependent on the political leaning of the actor or interest group. Therefore, weight is given to US public opinion. Yet, given the media landscape and nature of US power, public opinion can be extended to consider global opinion of countries, leaders, and populations. This factor is also important because much can be done to impact public opinion through reporting from legacy and social media, leaked information, false accounts, scandals, and accusations. Furthermore, Covey himself notes that the deepest, most important work usually receives less attention than the flashy crisis responses, but the general population or outlets that drive popular opinion might, through their own attention reward, incentivise splashy reactivity over deep, meaningful activity.

Elite preferences and tolerance are linked tangentially to public approval, but they are separate components. This is because within decision-making and information spaces, certain individuals will have interests they seek to protect or visions they wish to promote. But even these individuals will face pressure – either from voters or from competing elites. Their tolerance for pressure matters in how hard they can push for a categorisation or a priority.

Each of these constraints – and their interaction – has implications for the model. Because, as Covey notes, the matrix is incumbent upon a vision. But in the US, vision is contested along different fault lines, including between political parties, elites and grassroots movements, and competing interest groups. Furthermore, different actors will have an incentive, either well-intentioned or self-serving, to argue in favour of what they see as the most important elements. Alternatively, actors could share an agreed-upon objective or vision but differ on the means and trade-offs necessary to achieve that shared aim. Finally, visions, and the categorisation of urgence and importance, can evolve with context, information, and timelines.

Ponczek (2025) The urgent and the important: A conceptual matrix of US policy prioritisation. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 105–115.

The Quadrants in more detail and conceptual development

With the context of constraints and vision contestation in mind, and with the framing of what "Urgent" and "Important" mean in this resource-constraint context, the article now introduces the descriptions of the matrix quadrants in full.

Quadrant I: Important and Urgent

Quadrant I contains items that require attention (urgent) and that contribute to the vision or carry other significance (importance). Covey refers to these as "crises" or "problems" (1989, p. 152). The US response to the September 11 attacks could be used to illustrate this quadrant. The attacks were framed as urgent and existentially important. Decision-makers faced short time windows, incomplete information, and overwhelming public attention. Pressure for an immediate response dominated the policy agenda and media landscape.

Because Quadrant I often responds to loud issues, it is the quadrant marked by attention capture. The risk of functioning for too long in Quadrant I is that urgency becomes the metric of importance. Overuse of Quadrant I can also lead to sunk costs, in which policy makers and politicians continue to follow through on actions taken in the immediate aftermath of urgency and fail to question the longer-term effectiveness of action and resource distribution. At the government level, as items compete for attention and resources, triage must be established to identify, organise, and respond to the most urgent of the urgent. Such a triage system would need resources to establish and weigh the constraints of time, money, public opinion, and elite pressure against vision. In this compressed timeline, opportunities arise for actors to further insert their own interests. Further, the stakes are raised in a crisis, as public or internal government attention is fixated on the issue. In the current age of social media and the Internet, this crisis cycle is exacerbated and relentless. It allows less space to contemplate a vision and plan forward-focused actions.

It is necessary to spend time in Quadrant I occasionally by truly unforeseen or critical items, but in the longer-term, it can lead to burnout, instability, and poor management of resources. In the individual context, Covey warns that people can become consumed by tiny problems that feel important but expand to consume a disproportionate set of resources. Actors might feel tempted to spend a lot of time in Quadrant I, and many do, because it feels satisfying and has the illusion of effectiveness. But if everything is important and urgent, then nothing is.

Quadrant II: Important and Not Urgent

Quadrant II is where the most effective and deep work occurs. Covey lists the tasks within Quadrant II from a personal management perspective, including "building relationships, writing a personal mission statement, long-range planning, exercising, preventive maintenance, preparation" (1989, p. 154). He argues that people who spend most of their time in Quadrant II are effective and are "opportunity-minded" instead of "problem-minded" and that "[t]hey think preventatively" (ibid., p. 154). As a result, Covey contends, such people have fewer crises that require high, inefficient allocation of resources, and they are equipped to deal with emergencies in Quadrant I quickly and move smoothly back to Quadrant II. Such focus and consistency provide the ability to leverage competence.

Within Quadrant II, the US could manoeuvre to spend its resources on pre-emptive or anticipatory actions that underpin the vision of the US. This could mean delegating tasks to allies or intergovernmental organisations, continuing to work to diversify supply chains, or ensuring continuity of defence manufacturing.

Quadrant III: Urgent but Not Important

A corollary to the first two quadrants is that the US ought to spend as few resources as possible in any quadrant that is categorised as unimportant. So Quadrant III begins with a question: How does one decide what is not important? According to whom? Is there a set of objective principles, goals, or norms that can be pointed to? A non-important item would fail to align with broader visions, goals, and objectives – but who defines those? For the individual outlook, Covey (1989) says:

> *There are other people who spend a great deal of time in "urgent, but not important" Quadrant III, thinking they're in Quadrant I. They spend most of their time reacting to things that are urgent, assuming they are also important. But the reality is that the urgency of these matters is often based on the priorities and expectations of others. (p. 152)*

It is useful to pause on this point in the context of the application of the matrix to US government prioritisation. This quadrant requires clarity of vision and objectives to determine what is, in fact, not important. This requires time spent deciding what is important – as in Quadrant II. Because of the prerequisite for a consistent vision, this quadrant is susceptible to interest group influence and infighting.

It is also this quadrant that could serve as a stumbling block for US allies. Building relationships with countries, including allies, could be considered an objective among stakeholders in the US government. But ultimately, the US acts for its citizens and itself first. This might put allies in a difficult position, in which they reason that what is an important (and perhaps also urgent) issue for them ought to, by extension of partnership and alliance, be an issue of importance (and urgency) for the United States. But this is not always true in conceptual or practical application.

Certainly, there are consequences for situations in which the US might ignore or de-prioritise issues deemed "important" by allies. The response to such consequences, including diplomatic fallout, cooling, or divisions, can be categorised into the necessary quadrant depending on the second- and third-order effects. But just as Covey warns in the individual context that "the urgency of these matters is often based on the priorities and expectations of others" (1989, p. 152), so too might the US government be wary of falling into the trap of allowing others' priorities or visions to surpass its own, especially when responding to those priorities and visions consumes finite resources. The practical application is that the US might not share a vision with allies and therefore disagree on categorisation and choose to act differently.

Quadrant IV: Not Important and Not Urgent

This quadrant is a black hole of resource waste. In Covey's model, an actor ought to spend as few resources here as possible to avoid being mired. Applied to the US as a descriptive tool, the difficulty is its practical application, in which differences of opinion – driven by diverse motivations or visions – surface. Stakeholders, including elites, policymakers, or interest groups, can argue for their interpretation or try to sabotage and downgrade competing visions. Entire lobbying firms and political action committees have arisen to pursue these goals and impress upon decision makers precisely why their topic is important and the topics of others are not worth the resource expenditure.

Another difficulty in interpreting Quadrant IV is that while there must be topics that are neither important nor urgent, when asked to name one, reasoning patterns, assumptions, and normative goals emerge, muddling the assertion. This exemplifies contestation over the vision. Numerous personalities have made names (and books) for themselves detailing what they consider to be useless spending. From 2011 to 2014, US Senator Tom Coburn, of Oklahoma, published an annual "Wastebook", which

Ponczek (2025) The urgent and the important: A conceptual matrix of US policy prioritisation. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 105–115.

were reports that highlighted what he considered to be frivolous government spending; in other words, by his estimation, spending not important and not urgent (DeHaven, 2011). Examples include a National Institutes of Health study on why chimpanzees throw faeces; funding for the National Science Foundation to study mountain lions walking on a treadmill; and a promotional tour for the Alabama Watermelon Queen. The monkeys were studied as a part of motor development and social skills, including communication, language development, and possibly intelligence (Hopkins, Russell and Schaeffer, 2012). The mountain lions were observed walking on a treadmill to better understand their gait, hunting patterns, and energy expenditure in an effort to help with conservation efforts of carnivores, avoid human-animal conflicts and protect pets and livestock (Williams, 2014). The expenses of the Watermelon Queen came out of the US Department of Agriculture's Specialty Crop Block Grant program and were awarded to the Alabama Watermelon Association to promote healthy eating habits, especially in impoverished areas, and promote an important Alabama state crop. One can imagine this was a particularly important initiative for policymakers from Alabama.

These are not hypothetical scenarios: they are real discussions by policy and media personalities that elevate certain expenditures as scandalous or frivolous and shape public perception before a fuller context can emerge. This has consequences for public opinion and allocation of funds. Once a narrative of 'waste' takes hold, it can be politically costly to defend – even if the cited program serves long-term or less visible objectives. And while, with time, explanations can be found, as in the above cases, the attention economy makes it hard to unseat a status quo narrative.

Can one reason that a topic or issue is important because resources have been allocated to it? Or can one assume that some things are objectively not important but are funded anyway through the intervention of interest groups, the need to allocate leftover funds, or for other reasons? Quadrant IV is politically charged and highly contested.

More conceptual development: US allocation of finite resources

A best allocation" of US government resources does exist. But pinning it down is similar to the exercise that there is a way to approach a task like grocery shopping in a total rational spending-to-nutrition manner: the shopper must simply consider the amount of money they have, for example, US$150 (a constraint) and undertake the thankless task of weighing the benefits and trade-offs of every item in the grocery store based on price and nutrition and arrive at the best possible allocation of their US$150. As secondary factors, the hapless shopper might bring into consideration utility, pleasure, and preference. But – oh dear – by the time this is done, the grocery store has long since closed for the day, because to arrive at such a rational division is an impossible task. The perfect allocation is conceptually imaginable but practically unattainable.

The same holds for a perfect US policy prioritisation and resource allocation. Even if an optimal distribution of resources exists in theory, the best that can be done is for it to be approximated despite incomplete information and amidst competing visions. To complicate this, political leaders, bureaucratic actors, interest groups, voters, and external stakeholders may put forward overlapping or competing objectives – sometimes openly, and other times strategically hidden. They can advance arguments to advocate for why their priorities are important, urgent, or both. The matrix is analytically useful because it helps structure how these categorisations are constructed and could be defended, regardless of whether underlying visions diverge or align.

On the foreign policy stage, the "important and urgent" quadrant often appears as a manifestation of US power. These are moments when immediate action is expected because the core interests of the

US or allies are directly threatened. Such moments might come from miscalculations, neglect of long-term developments, or unforeseen adversarial action. These moments also reveal how prior judgments about what was "not urgent" or "not important" can prove to be miscalculations over time. Here, the US must be wary of entrenched interests, preconceived notions and assumptions about where to place resources to hedge and counter truly "important and urgent" crises. Failing to properly interrogate or update outdated models can lead to oversight. Such oversight can result in events that happen off the radar of resource allocation.

By contrast, the "important but not urgent" Quadrant II reflects preparation and hedging. This involves taking actions that work to prevent urgency later. Strategic planning helps the US to achieve domestic and foreign policy goals. Such work is a combination of planning, alliance maintenance, institutional coordination, and communication designed to prevent crises from emerging. This work is quieter, less visible, and at times more technical, but it is the foundation of long-term stability. Yet, from a public opinion and attention economy perspective, a failure to account for communication – whether within the political and bureaucratic spheres, or with the domestic public, or world leaders, or the global public at large – can have negative consequences. While the quiet work of non-urgent policy might be essential to realising the US's visions and goals, poor communication of this work and its strategic importance might leave public opinion floundering. This gives an opening for opponents (ranging from domestic political opposition to global adversaries) to take control of the narrative and recast diligent work as frivolous. In an attention economy, sustained preventive action can be difficult for a non-expert to understand; it can be easily recast as inactivity or waste or it can be sacrificed for political gain.

The remaining Quadrant III, urgent but not important, and Quadrant IV, neither urgent nor important, are particularly contested. What appears unimportant to one administration, electorate, or elite group might be central to another. Issues can move between categories as narratives shift, information evolves, or external actors apply pressure. No one wants their topic to be relegated to being unimportant. The difference between the two final quadrants is the question of urgency. An issue or event has urgency when – despite being deemed "not important" to the US – it is at risk of becoming too urgent to ignore. At times, the US, through its political leaders and policymakers, might downplay or ignore developments that are seemingly "unimportant" or "not urgent" but that carry a risk of escalation. This introduces questions of information flow, internal communication, and the ability to be candid. It also involves questions about whether policymakers have access to good, trustworthy information, and whether they care to maintain or establish such access. Relatedly, policymakers and political leaders must have the courage and integrity to maintain a position or own up to a mistake and change course with new information or context. On foreign policy interactions, there are parts of the world that onlookers might argue the US has deprioritised at its own peril.

Additional elements to consider: Pressure of the constraints

Given the nature of human error and the difficult process of striking a balance right between vision, policy, and action, it is probable that with all the time, money, and public goodwill in the world, well-intentioned, diligent policymakers might not arrive at a perfect allocation. Even a well-intentioned allocation might not be followed in practice. Mistakes are made, information is misinterpreted, individual actions weigh in, or chance intervenes.

But there are times of particular pressure that make the stakes higher. Electoral cycles and the attention economy shape prioritisation and bring together constraining factors quite clearly. During an election cycle, candidates are highly impacted by how the public sees an issue. This includes where the public ranks that issue on their priority list and whether they see (individual and aggregate) that issue as

Ponczek (2025) The urgent and the important: A conceptual matrix of US policy prioritisation. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 105–115.

plausible to contribute to an enduring vision of the US. Public perception and reaction to developments, which can be amplified through intense media coverage, can cause topics or actions to shift relative to others. In addition to this, social media personalities, commentators, and digital influencers actively construct narratives about what voters ought to care about. This can bring heightened attention to issues deemed "urgent" and can lead to voters, vis-à-vis media personalities, assigning importance to specific issues. This means that unknown – even highly niche – issues can be cast as a crisis or shortcoming. Political leaders and elites are aware of this dynamic. If the media fixates on an issue, a certain domestic audience will fixate on that issue, and the voters will expect action from their leaders. It can also work the other way around, in which voters push an issue to the forefront of the media cycle and causes it to have media publicity and therefore widens the attention paid by voters and then the expected attention from political leaders. This can bring voters and policymakers to hold up or discard issues regardless of any objective strategic importance. Some use it to their advantage, and others flail, or try to ignore it.

Furthermore, a change in administration might bring significant changes to priorities, but the underlying logic of prioritisation remains as leaders continue to operate within finite time, money, and political capital of the popular opinion and elite tolerance. That is because while qualifiers of "important" (or "not important") and "urgent" (or "not urgent") might shift and would need to be updated, the reasoning process itself would remain the same. Those in power would continue to assess how to allocate finite resources to assure to US of its domestic position and global standing in line with larger priorities. In an extreme scenario, the guiding value and principle might change, which could result in a substantial shift, but the basic system of reasoning would remain the same. This article has stuck to domestic constraints, but there are certainly additional forces that exist outside the US, like global economic trends, alliance dynamics, transnational media flows, and shifting expectations of US leadership. These second-order constraints interact with domestic pressures and constraints and complicate prioritisation.

Conclusion

There is value in setting forth a conceptual tool to consider the ways in which the US assesses prioritisation of issues across importance and urgency under conditions of constraint, and whether this sticks to a consistent vision or if it changes. If there are changes, it is important to ferret out the source of the shift and whether it is a response to constraints, location of power, or something else. In doing so, the matrix shows the political, institutional, and communication elements that interact with US policy. It allows observers to trace policy and reflect on its position within the matrix based on the actor.

When a particular US policy choice occurs – especially one that appears costly or controversial – its very occurrence shows that it was treated as important within the prevailing allocation structure, at least by those in power. Even if observers disagree with the action, placing it within the paradigm encourages a useful set of questions: What or whose broader objective/interests does this serve? Is it operationalising a longer-term strategy? Hindering it? Does it reflect electoral incentives, management of alliances, bureaucratic needs, or a shifting threat perception?

Rather than beginning from a normative judgment, the framework invites analytical inquiry as to why an issue came to occupy its position within the matrix, and who is aligning with or contesting the action, its resource allocation, and underlying vision. Methods to establish importance could rely on observation of who controls which policies (domestic and foreign policy), who is appointed where; allocation of funds; political will in the legislative or executive branches; and topics mentioned in party platforms or conventions (compared with action).

This article and the matrix do not presume to prescribe what the US should prioritise; instead, they help clarify how prioritisation happens. The matrix provides a structure for helping observers to reflect on how action or inaction might be categorised and explained with respect to change in vision, response to constraints, influence, and attention dynamics – to make order from what can sometimes feel like chaos.

Ponczek (2025) The urgent and the important: A conceptual matrix of US policy prioritisation. *Nordic Review of International Studies 5*, 105–115.

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Book Review

Whither dialogue? Nordic leadership and the collapse of Europe's two-track approach to Russia

Matti Pesu, Senior Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

Book Titles

Niinistö, S. (2025), Kaikki tiet turvaan – Sinnikkään Suomen suunta [All Roads to Security: The Course of a Resilient Finland]. WSOY.

Stoltenberg, J. (2025) On My Watch: Leading NATO in a Time of War. HarperCollins Publishers. .

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a watershed moment in European security. As four years have now passed since the act of aggression, scholarly and policy-oriented works addressing this consequential development have begun to accumulate. Among these, biographical accounts and memoirs by policymakers constitute an important strand of the emerging literature, offering first-hand perspectives on the road to war, its outbreak and evolution, and the responses formulated across the transatlantic space and beyond.

While Nordic authors have already contributed extensively to this literature, the present review concentrates on two works in particular. These offer contrasting perspectives on the war: one grounded in the experience of national political leadership, the other shaped by the demands of steering a multilateral defence alliance. Notably, the trajectories of these two leaders eventually intersected in the management of consequential security developments. Furthermore, both works trace how engagement-based approaches towards Russia ultimately collapsed as Moscow resorted to full-scale invasion in an effort to bring Ukraine back into its sphere of influence.

Sauli Niinistö, President of the Republic of Finland from 2012 to 2024, offers what is to date the most fine-grained policymaker account of Finland's path to NATO membership. His book is not solely a reflection on Finland's accession to the Alliance, but also a justificatory account of the foreign policy line he pursued and refined during his presidency. At the same time, the narrative is selective rather than comprehensive: it foregrounds key events and turning points, rather than providing an exhaustive overview of Finland's foreign policy during the period – a work that may be forthcoming on a later date.

The book – clearly oriented towards legacy-setting and narrative benchmarking – is structured around two main parts. The first examines Finland's 'roads to security', encompassing its relations with Sweden, the United States and Russia, as well as the domestic context of foreign-policy decision-making. The second part addresses the developments preceding and following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As the narrative progresses, its level of detail and intensity increases, particularly towards the end of the book.

In Finland, debates over Niinistö's legacy, an exceptionally popular leader during his time in office,

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have centred on his purportedly overly engagement-driven approach to Russia. Critics have pointed to the resulting caution in deepening Finland's military ties with NATO and key allies such as the United States, as well as his reluctance to explicitly steer Finland towards NATO membership before the 2022 watershed. This restraint has commonly been interpreted as stemming from a desire to avoid provoking Russia and from sensitivity to long-standing public opposition to military alignment.

The book demonstrates, however, that Niinistö's strategic compass was consistently oriented towards the West, even if his circumspect approach to advancing defence cooperation – manifested, for example, in the micromanagement of Finland's participation in international military exercises – appears, in hindsight, excessive. According to Niinistö's own account, he began to seriously consider NATO membership months before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This claim is credible on the basis of the evidence presented in the book, even if such deliberations were not apparent to most observers of Finnish foreign policy until the invasion itself fundamentally altered the strategic environment. Against the backdrop of current turbulence within the West, Niinistö's low-key, pragmatic, and moderate views on NATO membership appear measured and prudent, particularly when contrasted with the more hubristic tones that characterised parts of the Finnish NATO accession debate.

In sum, the book reinforces Niinistö's image as a risk-averse leader who genuinely believed in the value of dialogue among disagreeing actors. For Finland, the outcomes of dialogue were mixed. Considerable political capital and diplomatic effort were invested in sustaining engagement with Russia, with limited tangible returns as Russian revisionism intensified. At the same time, bilateral dialogue arguably contributed to stabilising the Finnish–Russian relationship and furnished Finland with credibility and diplomatic capital in its dealings with Western leaders, including President Joe Biden.

Jens Stoltenberg's memoir, in turn, traces his ascent to the position of NATO Secretary General and, in particular, how he steered the Alliance through his unusually long and eventful ten-year tenure. The book focuses on the Alliance's central challenges: managing Donald Trump's turbulent first term as US president, overseeing the dramatic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, and coordinating NATO's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The narrative is heavily centred on high-level interactions among allied leaders. For readers interested in the Alliance's everyday functioning or its institutional intricacies, this emphasis may prove disappointing.

The most compelling sections of the book concern developments related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the behind-the-scenes accounts of Stoltenberg's and fellow allied leaders' interactions with Trump. By most accounts, Stoltenberg handled Trump skilfully, and recent scholarship has underscored his role in safeguarding NATO's cohesion and, arguably, its survival during Trump's first term (Schuette, 2021).

Like Niinistö, Stoltenberg – shaped by Norway's strategic culture of deterrence and reassurance vis-à-vis Russia (Cameron, 2024) – was a committed proponent of dialogue with Moscow. This conviction was reinforced by his close relationship with his father, the former Norwegian foreign minister Thorvald Stoltenberg. As Norwegian prime minister, Stoltenberg had experienced periods of constructive bilateral relations with Russia, and one of his ambitions as Secretary General was to transpose elements of that engagement to the NATO–Russia relationship. While Stoltenberg points to certain limited achievements – such as agreements on air-safety 'rules of the road' in the Baltic Sea, an initiative initially promoted by Niinistö when Finland was still only an Enhanced Opportunities Partner of NATO, and the revitalisation of the NATO–Russia Council – efforts to restore meaningful dialogue after 2014 ultimately failed.

Maintaining dialogue with Russia proved difficult for several reasons. First, Russia's approach to NATO was openly hostile, a reality Stoltenberg encountered already in his first meeting with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who showed little interest in genuine dialogue. Second, Stoltenberg's dialogue-oriented

approach did not enjoy universal support among NATO allies. He recounts an illustrative anecdote from Lithuania, where he sought to persuade the Lithuanian Minister of National Defence, Juozas Olekas, of the feasibility of dialogue with Russia. The response was telling: "Jens, you have travelled in Russia to promote environmental projects. I, by contrast, was born in a gulag." At the same time, a majority of allies remained highly cautious about provoking Russia in any way, a stance that constrained NATO's ability to reintroduce robust collective defence measures following Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

Beyond their shared belief in dialogue, Niinistö and Stoltenberg are also linked by their roles in Finland's (and Sweden's) NATO accession process. Both books recount these developments from distinct vantage points. Stoltenberg – initially taken aback by the sudden membership applications – proved, in his role as Secretary General, indispensable in guiding Helsinki's and Stockholm's uncertain and partly rocky path to Alliance membership. In the acknowledgements of his book, Niinistö explicitly singles out Stoltenberg, expressing particular gratitude for his strong support.

Stoltenberg, in turn, devotes several pages to the Nordic membership processes, including the high-stakes meeting between representatives of Finland, Sweden and Turkey on the margins of NATO's Madrid Summit in July 2022, remembering Niinistö's clear frustration with Turkish obstructionism. While the meeting ultimately unlocked the ratification process among the Allies, Ankara repeatedly complicated the proceedings, delaying accession until Finland and Sweden joined the Alliance in 2023 and 2024 respectively.

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