

UNIVERSITY OF COLOGNE

FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT, ECONOMICS, AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

MASTER'S OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

Realpolitik or Strategic Culture?

Sweden and Finland's *Foreign Policy Shift* Due to the Russian-Ukrainian War

Term Paper

(Consists of 2861 words excluding the title page, annex, and bibliography)

By

Ömer Faruk Durmuş

(7406414)

Gaming Strategic Competition: Simulation außen- und sicherheitspolitischer Entscheidungen
in der Anarchie des internationalen Systems

Kessler, Patrick Benedict

August 1, 2024

1. Introduction

The notion of “a secure Europe” took a journey to the unknowns right after Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a "special military operation" in Ukraine in February 2022 (MacFarquhar and Troianovski 2022). This event has been described as the largest attack on a European country and the first full-scale war since World War II (Herb and Starr 2022). Consequently, the boiling cauldron of security threats has prompted profound concerns about Europe's future (Dempsey 2023). Although the main target in this war was Ukraine, various actors such as Sweden and Finland, due to their geographical proximity, have started to ask themselves: What if we are next?

Sweden and Finland have been politically affiliated with the West through several bounds, including the European Union, yet they have chosen to be militarily non-aligned to ensure what they call the “Nordic Balance” (Andrén 1979). However, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these two countries started to search for an “ontological security” (Elgin and Lanoszka 2023). This became evident in public opinion pools and narratives of officials in both Sweden and Finland (Jansson and Ludin 2024). In response to the new security environment, Sweden and Finland had to change their longstanding neutrality in terms of security alliances which resulted in their application to join the NATO (Joseph n.d.).

Although scholars have examined Sweden and Finland's journey toward NATO membership, comprehensive research is necessary to clarify theoretical ambiguities and offer different perspectives. Therefore, this study examines *how the Russian-Ukrainian war shaped public opinion and foreign policy preferences in Sweden and Finland leading to their decision to join NATO*.

By applying a qualitative document and content analysis, we offer a comprehensive approach to examine the shift in public opinion and governmental responses in Sweden and Finland regarding NATO membership. We aim to accomplish this objective by providing pre- and post-war perspectives supported by extensive literature on strategic culture. This method helps us to explain the interplays between long-standing neutrality and adaptive change in the strategic cultures of Sweden and Finland. Data gathered from public opinion polls, official documents, statements of government officials, news outlets, research institutions, and journals, has enabled us to illustrate the shift in public and foreign policy decisions toward the NATO alliance in Sweden and Finland.

Consequently, we argue that the Russian-Ukrainian war has significantly exacerbated security threats in the region, leading to a notable shift in public opinion and governmental policy in Sweden and Finland in favor of NATO membership. Furthermore, we suggest that this radical change can be explained not only by realist assumptions of security and alliance seeking but also by a shift in their long-standing strategic culture which we define as ‘neutrality’.

This study proceeds in three steps. First, it examines Sweden and Finland’s longstanding neutrality toward NATO membership historically. Then, it discusses several points: connections between the theoretical framework and the case, the gaps in the existing research, and the contributions of the analysis. Second, it explores the existing literature on strategic culture by applying it to the case of Sweden and Finland's NATO journey. Finally, it presents the research design and methodology that underpin this study.

2. Literature Review

The historical overview reveals that despite their differing backgrounds of neutrality, both Sweden and Finland previously refrained from NATO membership (Dahl 2011). However, discussions about NATO membership gained traction following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, which brought these countries closer to considering NATO membership (Binnendijk and Rodihan 2020). Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further underscored the critical role of alliances, particularly highlighting the importance of NATO membership and Article 5, which enshrines the principle of collective defense (Brooke-Holland 2024).

The concept of “alliance seeking” has long been discussed in the lexicon of international relations theories. The theories of *balance of power* and *balance of threat* are prominent in understanding why and how states seek alliances. The balance of power, which is rooted in classical realism, proposes that states will join alliances to keep each other from becoming hegemonic powers and preserve the balance in an anarchical international system (Waltz 1979). On the other hand, the balance of threat theory suggests, states are more affected by perceived threats than by raw power inequalities when deciding to form or join an alliances (Walt 1987).

Theories explaining why countries seek alliances extend beyond the balance of power and balance of threat concepts. One practical term that can be applied to Sweden and Finland's case is the strategic culture which emphasizes the influence of a nation's historical experiences, identity, and societal norms on its foreign policy. In his seminal work, Jack Snyder introduced the concept of strategic culture by demonstrating how internal beliefs and norms shape a state's international actions, challenging the rationalist view that states act solely on rational calculations (Snyder 1977).

The existing literature on alliance-seeking and participation mostly relies upon realist and game theoretical explanations by overlooking the impacts of ideational factors. Also, the literature mostly addresses alignment and alliance formation rather than military participation. Lastly, current research on Sweden and Finland tends to examine each country individually leading scholars to neglect the differences and similarities between both countries.

This study aims to contribute to existing research in several ways. First, we bridge the realist perspective and strategic culture in alliance-seeking. We suggest that *realpolitik* impacted both countries' decision to join NATO. At the same time, we argue that this shift has also fundamentally altered their strategic cultures profoundly influencing public opinion. Second, Sweden and Finland as real-world case will add insights to the existing literature, particularly regarding the formal process of joining a military alliance. Lastly, this study provides a comparative historical analysis of the military neutrality of Sweden and Finland through the lens of strategic culture. We also believe that the discussion on strategic culture will reshape our understanding of threat assessment, security considerations, and the factors driving strategic behavior in times of security crisis.

Although we aim to contribute to the literature by examining Sweden and Finland's foreign policy shift from neutrality to NATO membership in the context of strategic culture, it is crucial to acknowledge the need for further research with diverse approaches to address methodological, theoretical, and practical challenges, especially in the context of an ongoing war.

3. Theoretical Framework

A widely used notion in examining the rationale behind the strategic behavior of countries in international relations is the concept of strategic culture. Despite agreeing on the purpose of strategic culture, scholars have been arguing the question of how it should be defined

(Haglund 2014). In this study, we will only zero in on the stability and change aspects of the strategic culture due to the respective limitations.

Although there are many different views, much of the scholarly debates on strategic culture revolve around Gray vs. Johnston (Lock 2017). Colin Gray, a prominent figure in the first generation defines strategic culture as “the impact of historical experiences, traditions, and values on a nation's strategic behavior and policy”. He emphasizes that strategic culture provides a persistent and pervasive influence on national security policies (Gray 1999). Gray advocates for a holistic understanding of strategic culture that integrates a wide array of historical, social, and cultural influences (Gray 1999).

In contrast, Johnston offers a more precise and empirically testable definition of strategic culture. He describes it as "an integrated system of symbols (e.g., argumentation structures, languages, analogies, metaphors) which acts to establish pervasive and long-lasting strategic preferences by formulating concepts of the role and efficacy of military force in interstate political affairs" (Johnston 1999). Johnston emphasizes the symbolic and ideational components that shape strategic preferences over time, contending that while strategic culture influences behavior, it does not determine it outright. He critiques the broad definition of Gray for causing tautology, where strategic culture becomes an all-encompassing explanation that lacks specificity (Johnston 1999).

We accept Gray’s account of strategic culture as it reflects a country’s strategic behavior in times of high-security concerns. Therefore, we argue that geographical proximity, shared cultures and history, and similarities in foreign policy preferences prove Finland and Sweden’s strategic culture until the first bullet of the Russian-Ukrainian war was to remain non-aligned with NATO because of the explicit Russian threat.

However, Gray also asserts that if strategic culture is viewed as easily changeable within short periods (such as yearly or even over a decade), then calling it "culture" might be an overstatement (Gray 1999). Therefore, the length and magnitude of this “change” and the factors behind it, are still in question.

With the eruption of the war, we observed a radical shift in the public, institutional behavior, and governments’ discourse about NATO membership in both countries, favoring full membership to NATO. If that is the case, we argue that first-generation theorists’ assumptions on strategic culture, especially Gray’s holistic account remain insufficient in explaining the shift in foreign policy preferences in Sweden and Finland after the war (Johnston 1999).

Contrary to Gray, Jhonston provides a valuable perspective claiming that strategic culture is not static but adapts to changing security environments and external threats with what he calls “objective variables” (Johnston 1999). Additionally, he opposes the implicit claim of the first-generation theorists that “strategic thought led consistently to one type of behavior” (Johnston 1999).

To summarize, we argue that both scholars provide valuable insights into the case of Sweden and Finland’s NATO membership. While Gray’s approach gives us a context to understand the longstanding neutrality of Sweden and Finland, Johnston’s views on strategic culture remain valuable tools to explain the shift in foreign policy preferences in both countries.

Therefore, rather than choosing a single methodological winner as Gray proposed, we redefine strategic culture to encompass the shared norms and ideas regarding foreign policy that societies develop based on their sociological, geographical, and historical contexts. While these elements are generally durable, they can exhibit flexibility and adaptability in response to national security issues. In the ultimate analysis, we argue that Sweden and Finland's shift

towards NATO membership is driven by heightened security concerns and a gradual change in their strategic cultures.

Hypothesis 1: The long-standing neutrality of Sweden and Finland reflects their shared strategic culture, which has developed over time due to similar historical and cultural backgrounds. This strategic culture influenced their foreign policy choices regarding NATO membership until the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.

Hypothesis 2: The security threats arising from the Russian-Ukrainian war have profoundly influenced public opinion and governmental policies in Sweden and Finland resulting in increased support for NATO membership.

4. Research Design and Method

4.1 Research Design Classification

This qualitative study aims to elucidate the shift in Sweden and Finland's foreign policy preferences regarding NATO membership after the Russian invasion of Ukraine through the lens of strategic culture.

Qualitative methodology is a type of social science research that collects and works with non-numerical data which helps us understand social life by examining a targeted case (Punch 2005).

Therefore, we employ qualitative document and content analysis by adopting a longitudinal perspective. This method allows us to examine changes in security dynamics in the Nordic region and their implications for the strategic culture of both Sweden and Finland before and after the war regarding the NATO alliance. Our research strategy is non-experimental and utilizes case studies of Sweden and Finland to provide in-depth and contextualized understandings of their foreign policy outcomes. Additionally, the study

involves both field studies, which observe current political dynamics, and content analysis, which examines historical documents and public opinion data.

4.2 Case Selection

This study applies the process tracing method within a comparative case study framework to examine how Sweden and Finland's foreign policy preferences shifted toward NATO membership. We suggest that Sweden and Finland are the perfect fit to investigate because both countries share geographical proximity to the conflict area and a history of neutrality.

Additionally, process tracing allows us to examine the sequence of events, such as changes in both countries' public opinion, NATO summits, and incumbent governments' decision-making processes that led to their NATO accession. By looking at historical contexts, security changes brought about by events like Russia's annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Ukraine, and internal policy developments, we aim to uncover shared and unique factors influencing their strategic behavior. We suggest that this approach not only deepens our understanding of the role of strategic culture in alliance-seeking in wartime but also highlights the broader implications for international security.

4.3 Method(s)

The study employs qualitative documents and content analysis to explore Sweden and Finland's NATO membership process through the lens of strategic culture. This dual-method approach allows us to examine the textual data and its contextual meanings related to the strategic shifts observed in Sweden and Finland.

4.3.1 Approach and Justification

We suggest that qualitative document and content analysis is well-suited for this study as it enables a detailed examination of various texts and documents related to Sweden and

Finland's NATO accession. Our qualitative document analysis focuses on understanding the content and context of documents, while content analysis provides a systematic approach to categorizing and interpreting textual information. For this study, key documents include:

1. Defense Policies and White Papers: Official documents covering Sweden and Finland's defense strategies and policies.
2. Public Opinion Polls: Surveys and polls reflect changes in public attitudes towards NATO membership before and after the war.
3. Government Statements: Official statements and speeches by political leaders regarding NATO accession before and after the war.
4. Media Reports: News articles and media coverage discussing the NATO accession process and strategic culture.
5. Journal Articles: Papers analyzing Sweden and Finland's foreign policy preferences and strategic cultures before and after the war.

4.4 Operationalization

One of the most effective tools for developing and testing causal assumptions is Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAGs). DAGs are visual representations of causal relationships, which have become increasingly prevalent in modern quantitative and qualitative research. The use of DAGs facilitates the identification of causal pathways, and this enhanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying a given phenomenon can contribute to improvements in scientific quality, including increased reliability and internal and external validity (Röth n.d.)

Table 1. Variables Table

Variables	Details
Independent Variable (Treatment)	Security Concerns
Mediator I	Changes in Public Opinion
Mediator II	Changes in Foreign Policy Preferences
Dependent Variable (Outcome)	Military Alliance (NATO membership)

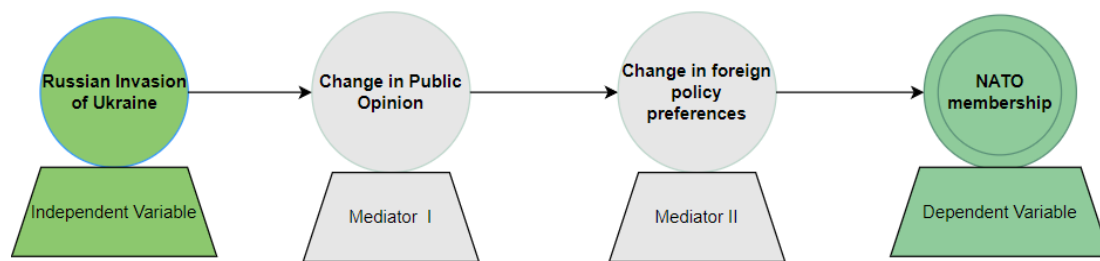
Independent Variable

We assigned the ‘Russian-Ukrainian war’ as an independent variable to our causal mechanism as this war has dramatically altered the security landscape of Europe. The immediate and palpable security threat posed by Russian aggression has heightened the perception of vulnerability in these countries, driving them to reconsider their strategic alignments and ultimately reevaluate their stance on NATO membership.

Dependent Variable

The outcome variable in this research is ‘Sweden and Finland's shift towards NATO membership’. This process implies broader changes in public opinion and governmental policy. The Russian-Ukrainian war has significantly influenced public sentiment in increased support for NATO membership which we observed in both countries. This shift in public opinion has, in turn, led governments to adopt new security policies. Thus, the dependent variable reflects the comprehensive transformation in Sweden and Finland’s foreign policy from military non-alignment to active participation in the NATO alliance, driven by the acute security threats emanating from the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Graph 1. Casual Diagram of Sweden and Finland's NATO Membership



As shown in Graph 1, we took the "Russian Invasion of Ukraine" as our independent variable and "NATO membership" as the dependent variable (Outcome).

Firstly, we applied the Russian invasion of Ukraine (IV) as an exogenous factor, because the research proposal involves a complex and real-world event that cannot be replicated in a laboratory setting. Then, we assigned two mediators to our casual mechanism. First is the "Change in Public Opinion" (M) which is affected by an exogenous factor -the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The second mediator is "Change in foreign policy preferences" (MII). As a result, changes in foreign policy preferences in Sweden and Finland led to NATO membership.

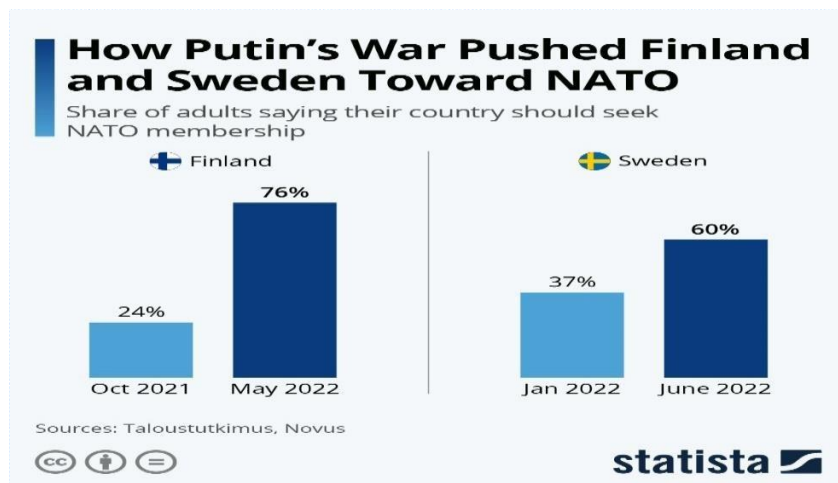
At first glance, the diagram might appear to suggest a confounder which is whether public opinion influenced the shift towards NATO membership or if policymakers in Sweden and Finland drove this issue onto the public agenda. This ambiguity requires in-depth research. However, based on our theoretical framework, we intended to overcome this issue by suggesting that the Russian-Ukrainian war posed a significant threat to Sweden and Finland, impacting their strategic culture—specifically, the deeply ingrained notion of neutrality. This evolving security environment led to substantial changes in societal attitudes, thereby precipitating a decisive shift in foreign policy. Consequently, both countries pursued and achieved NATO membership.

4.5 Data for analysis

In this study, we examined survey data from Finnish and Swedish citizens concerning their opinions on defense spending and NATO membership before and after the Russian-Ukrainian war. We also analyzed documents related to the policies and narratives of government officials in both countries during the same period. Additionally, we utilized secondary data sources, including Swedish and Finnish government statements, and media reports such as NATO press releases, to explore the factors influencing changes in public opinion and foreign policy preferences. Among the open sources utilized in our analysis are the Pew Research Center, Statista, IPSOS, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), and Eurobarometer surveys conducted by research institutes.

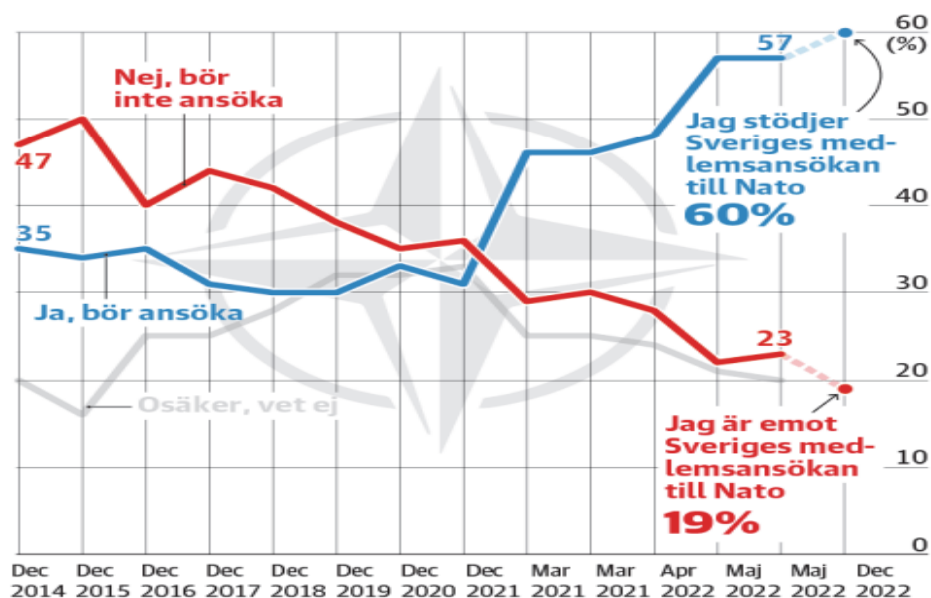
Annex:

Figure 1. How Putin's War Pushed Finland and Sweden Toward NATO?



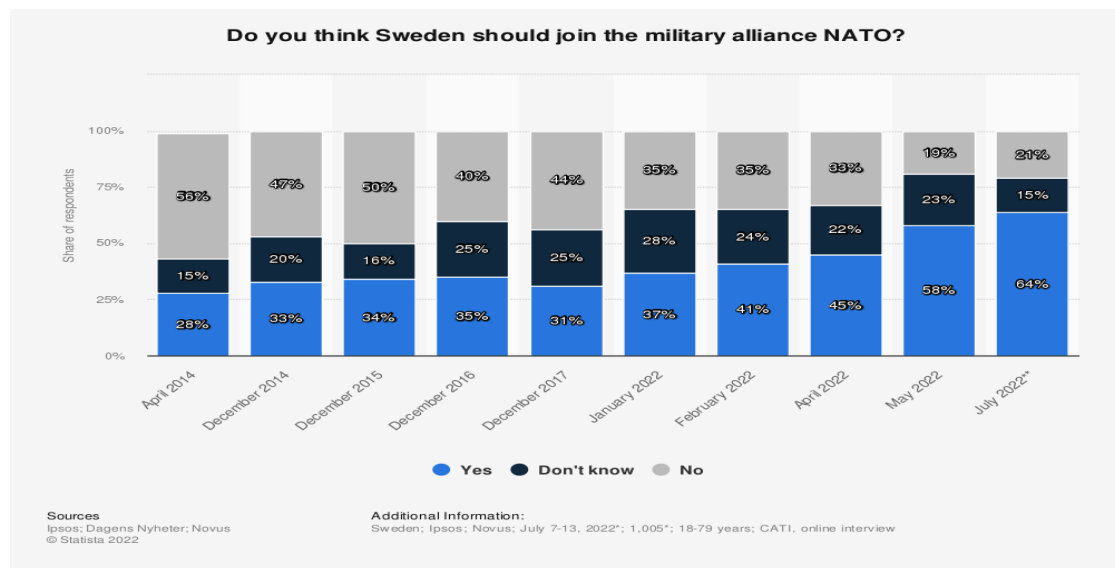
Resource: Public opinion poll in Sweden and Finland on the Nato alliance before and after the Russian-Ukrainian war broke out. <https://www.statista.com/chart/27422/public-support-joining-nato-finland-sweden/>

Graph 2. Do you support Sweden's application to NATO, or are you against Sweden's application to NATO?



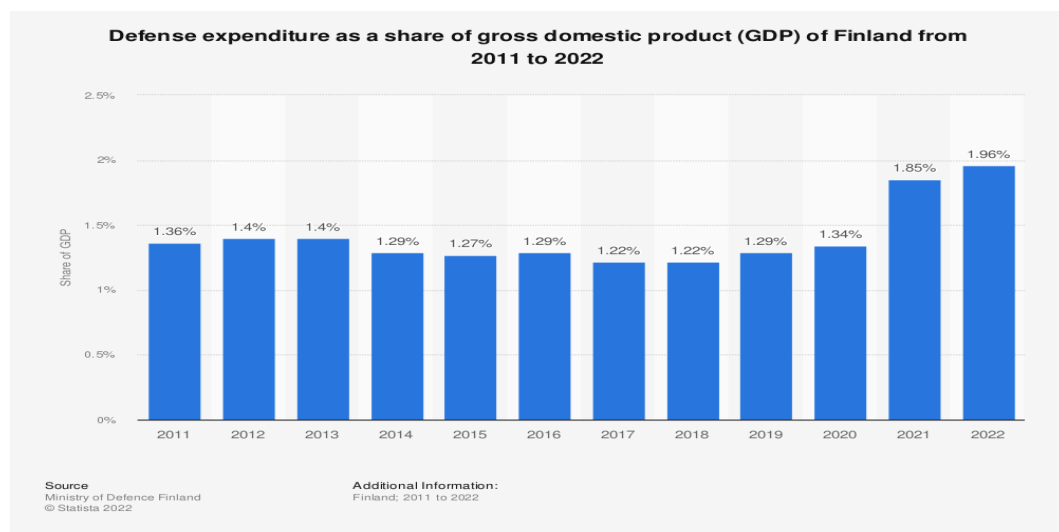
Resource: Stefan Rothmaier Källa: DN/Ipsos Rosén 2023.

Figure 2.



Resource <https://www.statista.com> Public opinion poll in Sweden on Nato alliance from 2014 to July 2022

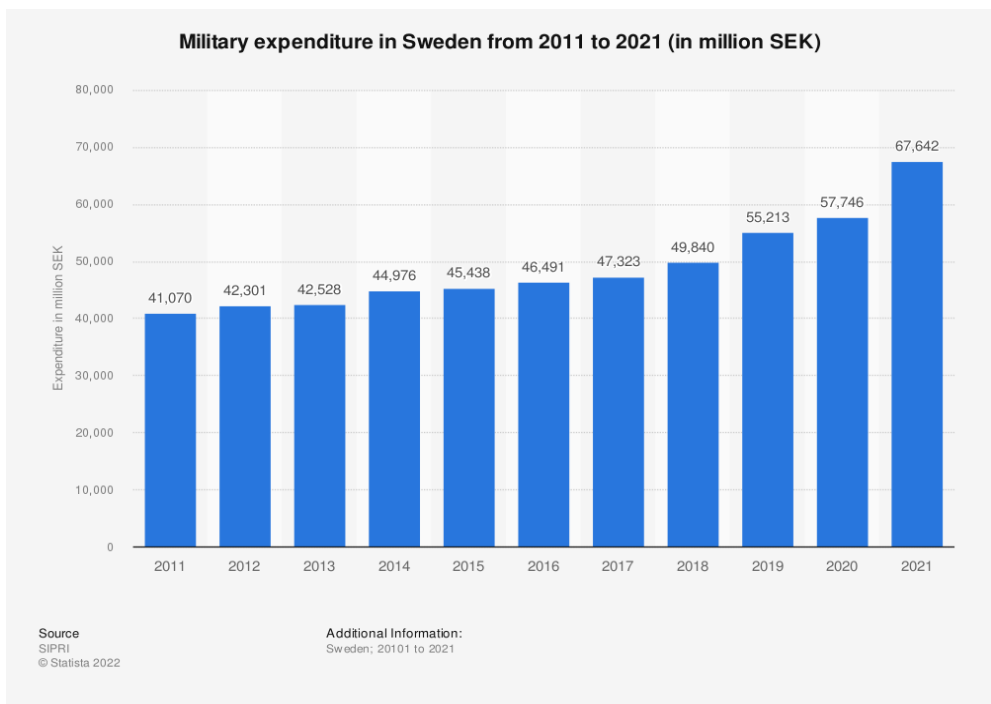
Figure 3. Defense spending of Finland from 2011 to 2022



Resource: Defense expenditure as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) of Finland from 2011 to 2022

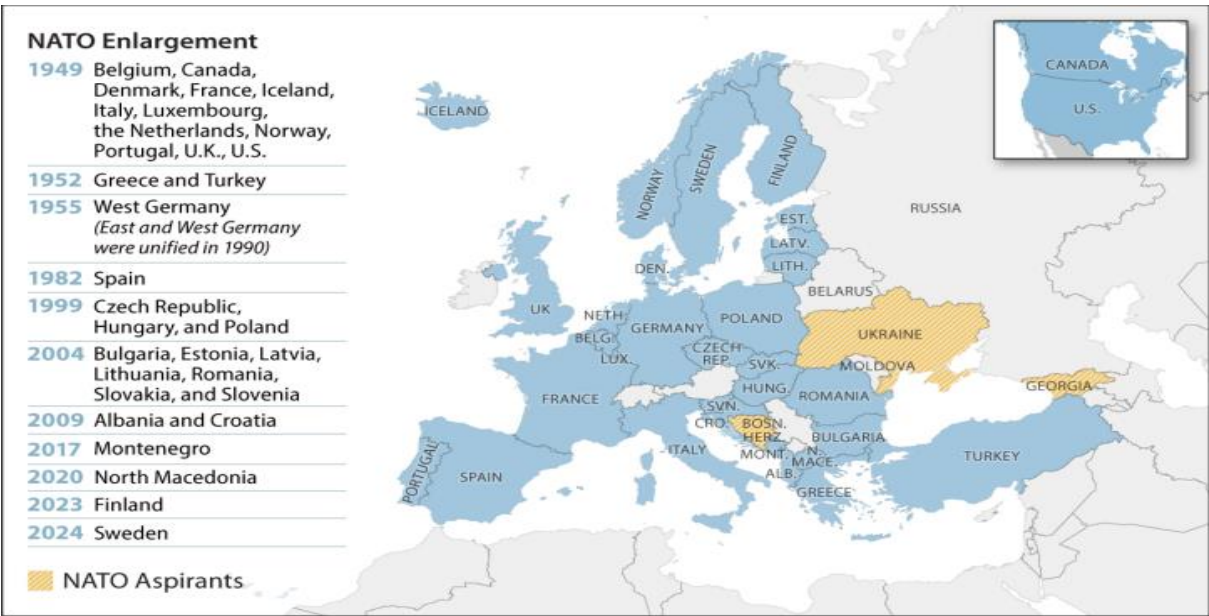
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/530097/defence-budget-relative-to-gdp-finland/>

Figure 4. Military spending in Sweden from 2011 to 2021



Resource: *Military expenditure in Sweden from 2011 to 2021* <https://www.statista.com/statistics/695627/military-spending-in-sweden/>

Map 1. NATO Members and Aspirants



Resource: CRS Graphics. Map updated March 2024. (Archick 2024)

Bibliography:

- Andrén, Nils. 1979. "The Nordic Balance: An Overview." *The Washington Quarterly* 2(3): 49–62. doi:10.1080/01636607909477407.
- Archick, Kristin. 2024. "NATO Enlargement to Sweden and Finland." *Congressional Research Service*. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11949#:~:text=Sweden%20joined%20NATO%20on%20March,accede%20to%20the%20alliance%20together.>
- Binnendijk, Hans, and Conor Rodihan. 2020. *FINNISH AND SWEDISH NONALIGNMENT AND DEFENSE POSTURES*. Atlantic Council. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep24665.7> (July 17, 2024).
- Brooke-Holland, Louisa. 2024. "NATO Enlargement: Finland and Sweden." In House of Commons Library. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9574/CBP-9574.pdf>.
- Dahl, Ann-Sofie. 2011. *Sweden, Finland and NATO*: Atlantic Council. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep03562.5> (July 17, 2024).
- Dempsey, Judy. 2023. "The War in Ukraine Is About Europe's Future." *Carnegie Endowment Europe*.
- Elgin, Katherine Kjellström, and Alexander Lanoszka. 2023. "Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership (Spring 2023)." doi:10.26153/TSW/46144.
- Gray, Colin S. 1999. "Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation of Theory Strikes Back." *Review of International Studies* 25(1): 49–69. doi:10.1017/S0260210599000492.
- Haglund, David G. 2014. "What Can Strategic Culture Contribute to Our Understanding of Security Policies in the Asia-Pacific Region?" *Contemporary Security Policy* 35(2): 310–28. doi:10.1080/13523260.2014.927674.
- Herb, Jeremy, and Barbara Starr. 2022. "US Orders 7,000 More Troops to Europe Following Russia's Invasion of Ukraine." *CNN Politics*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/24/politics/us-military-ukraine-russia/index.html>.
- Jansson, Daniel, and Ulrika Ludin. 2024. "Opinion on NATO: Record Shift between 2021 and 2022." *University of Gothenburg*. <https://www.gu.se/en/news/opinion-on-nato-record-shift-between-2021-and-2022>.
- Johnston, Alastair Iain. 1999. "Strategic Cultures Revisited: Reply to Colin Gray." *Review of International Studies* 25(3): 519–23.
- Joseph, Clark. "Pentagon Welcomes Sweden, Finland in Ceremony Marking NATO Anniversary." <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3731771/pentagon-welcomes-sweden-finland-in-ceremony-marking-nato-anniversary/>.

- Lock, Edward. 2017. "Strategic Culture Theory: What, Why, and How." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.320.
- MacFarquhar, Neil, and Anton Troianovski. 2022. "Putin Announces Start to 'Military Operation' Against Ukraine." *NY Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/23/world/europe/ukraine-russia-invasion.html>.
- Punch, Keith. 2005. "Introduction to Social Research – Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches." [http://lst-iiiep.iiiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/\[in=epidoc1.in\]/?t2000=023993/\(100\)](http://lst-iiiep.iiiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/[in=epidoc1.in]/?t2000=023993/(100)).
- Röth, Leonce. "Pathway Analysis, Causal Mediation and the Identification of Causal Mechanisms."
- Snyder, Jack L. 1977. *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Walt, Stephen M. 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 1979. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.