

Realpolitik Altered the Course: Changing Foreign Policy Preferences and Public Opinion in Sweden and Finland Due to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

This study seeks to examine the effects of Russian—Ukrainian war in non-allied countries such as Sweden and Finland. The complexities of analysis in a fast-changing public perception environment and government strategies on NATO membership are traversed by our qualitative content analysis. Theoretically, our frameworks rest on theories of public opinions and policy making. Also, we focus on the manner in which media and government discourse affects public opinions and foreign policy choices. The study demonstrates a significant shift in foreign policy preferences toward NATO membership as a result of the conflict in conjunction with media coverage and public discourse. The present study adds to the theoretical discussion on public opinion and how it affects government policies concerning the Swedish- and Finnish-Russian-Ukrainian War and these nations' historical neutrality. These results provide us with knowledge about global security and international alliance in Europe. It focuses on the significance of the major geopolitical events and their impact on the formation of public opinion that in turn shapes the foreign policy.

Keywords: Russian-Ukrainian war, security concerns, public opinion, government and media, qualitative methods

Jel Classification Codes: F5, D70, C81

Introduction

The long-held notion that war was a thing of the past on the European continent has been proven wrong by the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war. This heightened security environment has prompted discussions on security and defense arrangements, policies, and strategic directions in European countries. Finland and Sweden, two countries that felt the threat of Russia within their borders, have formally applied to join NATO as a result of Russian aggression. However, both Sweden's and Finland's applications had not been officially approved due to vetoes from Türkiye and Hungary up until Finland's membership on April 4, 2023. However, Sweden's NATO application is still waiting for the final decision of the Turkish parliament (Clapp 2022).

Although these two countries are politically affiliated with the Western block, they have chosen to be militarily non-aligned. Sweden has long maintained a neutrality policy as the foundation of its foreign policy. The country's foreign policy has traditionally emphasized non-alignment and peacemaking in order to avoid provoking Russia. Since the end of the Cold War, Stockholm has pursued a pragmatic security strategy of seeking to establish close ties with NATO without formally joining the alliance. Furthermore, some members of the political establishment and the general public in Finland and Sweden have strongly believed that it is best to remain uninvolved in disputes between Russia and the West, and that non-alignment helps reduce tensions in the region (Eellend 2016).

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Following World War II, the Soviet Union imposed a policy on Finland in exchange for the Kremlin's commitment not to annex the country to the USSR. Helsinki was careful to maintain communication with Moscow despite their differences and paid particular attention to Russia's interests. However, there has been a significant shift in Finnish support for NATO membership since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. A recent poll found that most Finns now support joining the alliance for the first time. Given their geographical proximity to Russia, Sweden, and Finland have long prioritized their armed forces and military spending. The cost of defense and military operations has increased significantly due to the Russian-Ukrainian War. Sweden plans to increase its defense spending by up to 2% of GDP over the next ten years. In Finland, this amount already accounts for around 2% of the country's total GDP as of 2022 ("SIPRI Military Expenditure Database" n.d.).

The relationship between policy preferences and public opinion is a subject that has been discussed in the literature for decades. Even some of the earliest discussions of the topic can be traced back to the work of political philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. This study examines the relationship between public and government policy preferences concerning Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership, which contributes to this theoretical debate (Plato 1943). In other words, the main objective is to identify the predominant determinant of NATO alignment along with qualitative content analysis.

In this study we aim to explore how did the Russian-Ukrainian war affect foreign policy preferences in non-aligned (Sweden and Finland) countries and to what extent governments affected the public opinion of these countries in terms of defense spending and NATO membership?

Our findings reveals that the security concerns stemming from the Russian-Ukrainian war have substantially changed foreign policy preferences in Sweden and Finland, and this led the countries to seek stronger security alignments. The new foreign policy climate had a significant impact on public opinion toward defense spending and NATO membership through agenda setting and media coverage, which resulted in greater support for NATO membership by the public. Consequently, Sweden and Finland have applied for NATO membership without holding a referendum.

Literature Review

Scholars from various schools of thought have been arguing about public opinion and its relation and influence on government policies. Some argue that "public opinion is often a proximate cause of policy, affecting policy more than policy influences opinion" (Shapiro and Page 1983).

Apart from that, as a result of the Second World War, the Almond-Lippmann consensus emerged: the main assumption was that public opinion was uninformed and poorly structured (Holsti and Revised ed. Ann Arbor 2004). Lippmann, in his seminal work "Public Opinion", painted a pejorative portrait of the public - one that was unable to process information critically or behave rationally. His argument relied on Plato's famous "cave allegory" concept. He states that "the world as they needed to know it, and the world as they did know it, were often two quite contradictory things" (Lippmann 1992). Conceptually, realism, or "the elite-centric model," claims that public opinion is more likely to be sentimental; irrational, uninformed, volatile, lacks structure and coherence, and can be manipulated by leaders (T. Knecht and M. S. Weatherford 2006).

In response to these assumptions, the next generation of scholars with a more optimistic view of public opinion claimed that foreign policy preferences had a structure. In addition to that, society is not numb to the real world. Even though public opinion assumptions are varied, they share a sense that public opinion has proceeded in order. This sense suggests that sources of order can only be derived from within the public itself (Kertzer, and Zeitzoff 2017).

Again, in response, a third wave has sprung up. This third trend also adopts an optimistic stance and acknowledges the predictability of public opinion, but argues that predictability is more elite-driven rather than public-driven. This leads to the manipulation of a "top-down" pathway in which the masses receive information from elite cue-givers (Baum and Groeling 2010).

According to Saunders (Saunders 2015), if public opinion about foreign policy is truly as top-down as elite cue-taking theories suggest, many domestic political accounts of international relations have misrepresented the democratic audience. Scholars such as (Hartley and Russett 1992) scrutinized by using varied quantitative data in their experiments, consequently reaching the assumption that "policy changes are triggered by shifts in public opinion".

The existing literature has a gap regarding how public opinion leads to the foreign policy of small non-aligned countries experiencing abrupt geopolitical shifts. Although many studies have been undertaken to understand the big powers, the complex dynamics in countries like Sweden, and Finland in the face of huge and sudden external challenges are understudied. However, this study attempts to provide an insight into how these initially neutral countries came up with the idea of accession into NATO as a result of the Ukrainian–Russian crisis. It however still remains uncertain how much the media and government discourse contribute to this shift in public opinion to change foreign policy preferences, with respect to the other non-aligned small nations. We enrich this area by explicating these processes, hence giving a comprehensive picture of the interaction between public opinion and foreign policy under exceptional geopolitics.

Methodology

One of the most effective tools for developing and testing causal assumptions is the use of Directed Acyclic Graphs (DAGs). DAGs are visual representations of causal relationships, which have become increasingly prevalent in modern epidemiological research. By explicitly defining the underlying relationships between variables, this structured approach serves as a valuable aid in scientific discussions and can help to address questions of causation. 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.).

Casual mechanism table content

Treatment = Security Concerns
Mediator I: Changes in Foreign Policy Preferences
Mediator II: Public Opinion

Covariant: Agenda Setting through media
Y(Outcome) =Military Alliance(NATO membership)

As it is shown in the above table, we took the "Security Concerns" as our treatment variable and Military Alliance(NATO membership)" as an outcome.

Firstly, we applied the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the "Security Concerns" (T) 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 “Changing foreign policy preferences” (M) which is affected by T (security concerns) and our exogenous factor

(Russian invasion of Ukraine). The second mediator is “Public opinion” (MII). To reach a clear conclusion about whether public opinion shaped foreign policy preferences in the case of NATO membership or whether it was the government itself that controlled the public opinion, we will assign “governmental discourse and media coverage” as a covariant variable to our casual inference.

To have a more clear view, our formula is then: $T \Rightarrow M \Rightarrow MII \Rightarrow Y$



There is a direct causal relationship between treatment (Security concerns) and defense spending. However, we do not have any information about whether there is a relation between public opinion and defense spending, or we do not know does it changed the governmental discourse and foreign policy preferences in some way. Additionally, raising defense spending was not a new concept for these countries since they have been threatened by Russia from their very existence, for that, this variable was left unobserved.

If we consider the causal relationships between the variables in the opposite direction, one could put forth that public opinion has changed the foreign policy preferences of non-aligned Nordics. As welfare-states examples, these highly democratic countries have relatively considered public opinion(Holmberg 1999). This contrasts a hypothetical situation in Afghanistan, where public opinion may not have as strong of an impact on foreign policy preferences. Therefore, it may be plausible to argue that public opinion can influence changes in foreign policy outcomes. One way to address this confounding is to include measures of government communication and agenda-setting in the analysis.

Furthermore, our design includes the qualitative component, such as public opinion surveys and interviews with government officials, to explore the role of government communication and agenda-setting in shaping public opinion and foreign policy preferences. This will provide a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underlying the observed changes in public opinion and foreign policy preferences, and help to identify any potential biases or limitations in the analysis.

We believe that the media coverage and governmental discourse were crucial to Nato's alignment in the historical context. The media has long been recognized as a powerful force in shaping public opinion. Research has shown that the media can have significant effects on individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors by agenda-setting and framing (McCombs and Shaw 1972). When it comes to governmental discourse, many examples reveal both countries' governments were opposed to direct NATO membership even though they had been in a temperate relationship with NATO. In the design section, we will take a closer look at Sweden and Finland's governmental discourse and policy stance about NATO chronologically.

A short discussion on DAG: Potential unobserved confounders:

Economic factors such as inflation, unemployment rates, and GDP growth could potentially influence public opinion and government policy regarding defense spending and NATO membership. Changes in the domestic political landscape, such as changes in government leadership or party platforms, could also influence public opinion and government policy on defense and NATO membership. International events outside of the Russian invasion of Ukraine might have potentially influenced governments' foreign policy preferences. For example, if a major terrorist attack occurred in Sweden or Finland after the invasion, this could influence support for increased defense spending. Age, economic and educational status as well as the political affiliation of the public in Sweden and Finland might be influential on shifted public opinion about NATO membership.

Data and cases for analysis

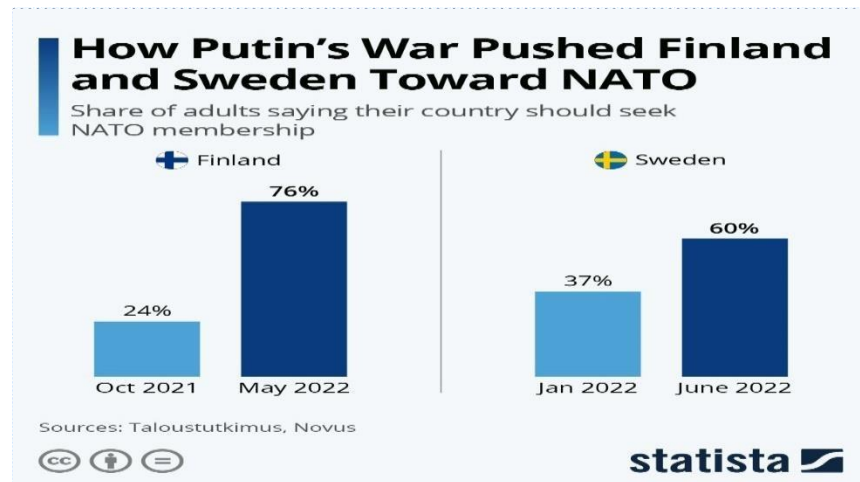
In this study, we utilized survey data gathered from Finnish and Swedish citizens regarding their foreign policy preferences, defense spending, and NATO membership both pre and post-Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Then we analyzed the policies and actions of the governments regarding NATO membership and defense spending during the same period. Additionally, we have recourse to secondary data sources such as government statements and media reports to explore the factors that influenced the changes in public opinion and foreign policy preferences.

To conduct our research, we used various open sources such as the Pew Research Center, Eurobarometer surveys, and national surveys conducted by research institutes. For example, the Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2013, before the Russian invasion of Crimea, indicated that 46% of Swedish citizens favored NATO membership while 47% were opposed to it. In contrast, the percentage of Finnish citizens in favor of NATO membership was lower, with only 25% in favor and 55% opposed.

We analyzed the governments' policy statements and actions regarding NATO membership and defense spending in 2014, after the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Swedish government increased its defense spending and signed a host nation support agreement with NATO. Similarly, the Finnish government increased its defense spending and signed a bilateral defense cooperation agreement with the United States. However, the question of becoming a member of NATO remained unanswered ("SIPRI Military Expenditure Database" n.d.).

As the infographic below presents the results of recent polling reveal a significant change in public opinion in Nordic countries due to the invasion of Ukraine. Before the conflict, a small percentage of Finns and Swedes were in favor of their countries joining NATO, but in May/June 2022, a majority of the population now supports the idea. Finland has seen a

particularly dramatic increase, with 76 percent of the population now expressing their support for membership (Armstrong 2022).



A Chronological Overview of Media and Governmental Discourse in Sweden and Finland

During the foundation of North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949, Sweden chose not to join NATO as a founding member. The Swedish government cited the need for neutrality and the ability to defend itself without reliance on outside powers as reasons for its decision.

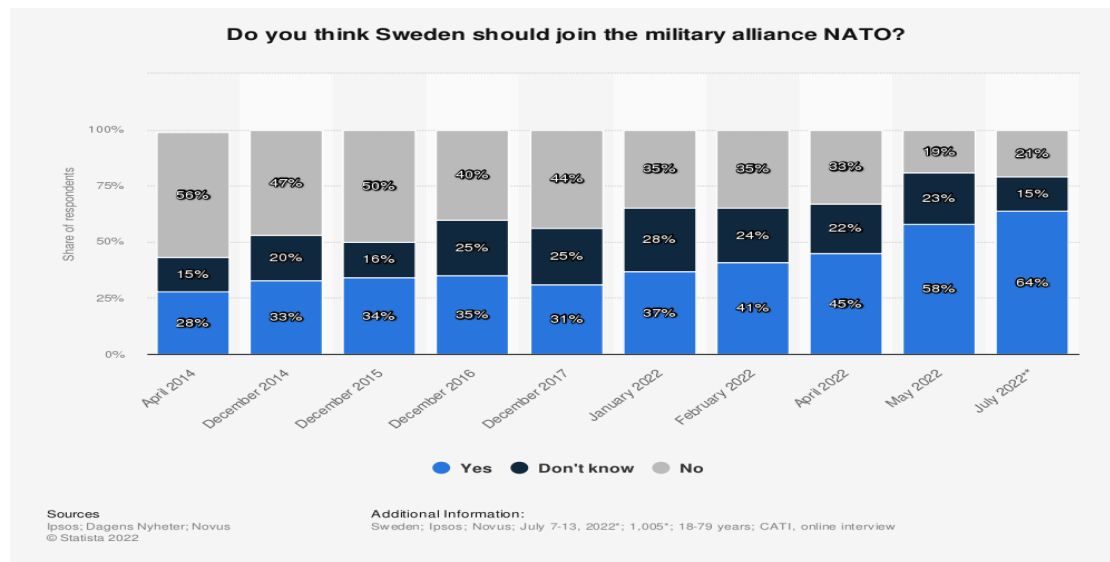
A lot has changed within time and starting from 2016, the Swedish government announced that it would be increasing defense spending and strengthening its military capabilities. The decision was made in response to increased Russian aggression in the region. The government reiterated its commitment to remaining outside of military alliances such as NATO (“Strengthening Sweden’s military defence” n.d.)

When we came to 2021, the Swedish government announced that Sweden will increase its military cooperation with NATO. The cooperation will include joint exercises and the sharing of intelligence. The government stated that this cooperation was not a step towards NATO membership, but rather a way to improve Sweden's defense capabilities (“Brussels Summit Communiqué” n.d.).

Foreign Minister Margot Wallström and Defence Minister Peter Hultqvist wrote in the newspaper Dagens Nyheter that “Changing the Swedish security policy doctrine would naturally be perceived as dramatic and revolutionary. It would have a direct effect on the security situation in our part of Europe,” the two ministers wrote. “Sweden’s military nonalignment contributes in a positive sense to the security stability in our region” (“NATO membership not for Sweden, Ministers say” n.d.).

Lastly, we find it necessary to emphasize Magdalena Andersson (Former Prime Minister of

Sweden) statement on February 27, 2022. "If Sweden were to choose to apply to join NATO in the current situation, it would further destabilize this area of Europe and increase tensions..." ("Swedish PM rejects opposition calls to consider joining NATO" 2022).



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

On the other side, Finland took an important step by signing a host nation agreement with NATO in 2014, which allows NATO forces to operate in Finland in the event of a crisis or conflict. The agreement does not constitute membership in NATO, but rather a way to improve Finland's defense capabilities (*The Government's Defence Report 2004* n.d.).

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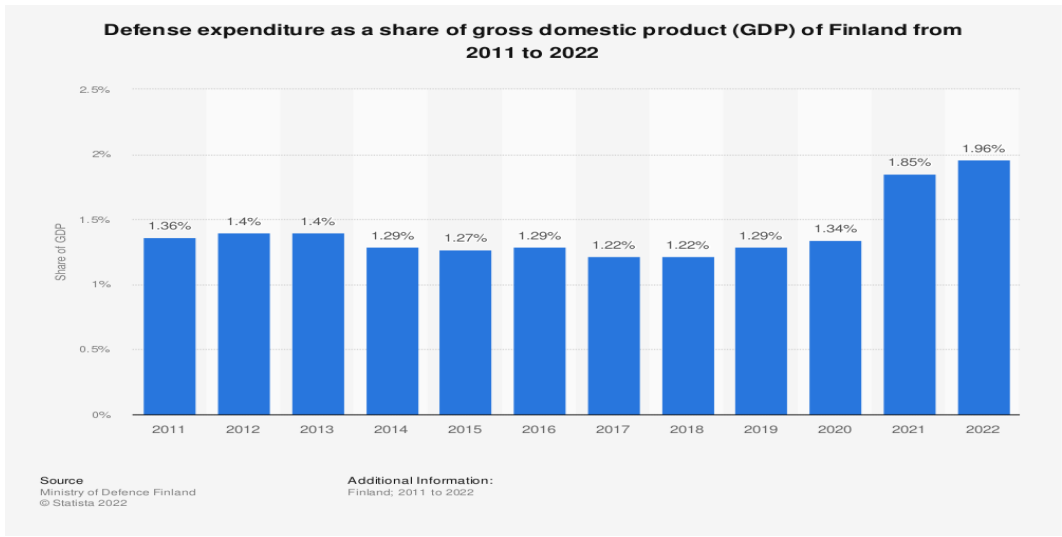
Moreover, the Prime Minister Sanna Marin, January 2021: "Finland's position on NATO membership remains unchanged. We are not considering NATO membership. Our security policy is based on maintaining strong national defense, developing our partnerships, and maintaining credible deterrence ("Nato membership 'very unlikely' on her watch: Finland's PM" n.d.).

These statements are just a few examples of the discourse from Swedish and Finnish authorities along their respective history about NATO membership that reveals both countries' governments had no purpose in becoming a member of NATO until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. After the invasion of Ukraine, both governments' discourses on NATO alignment sharply shifted. Following the war, the debate turned in favor of NATO membership, thus Finland and Sweden officially applied to join NATO on 18 May 2022 ("Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO" 2022).

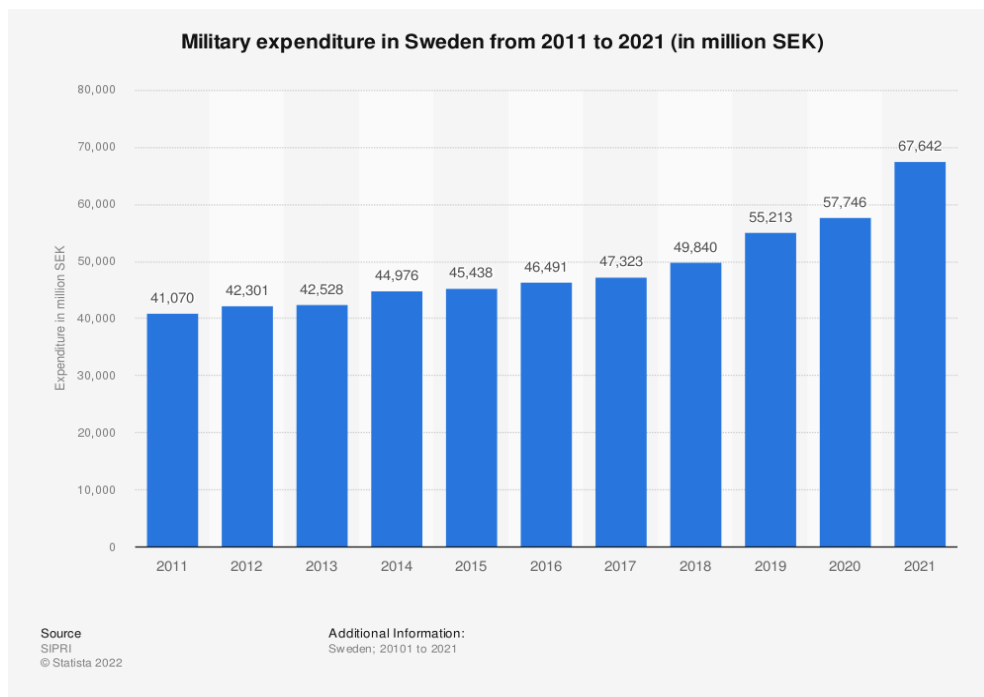
Consequently, our findings on governmental discourse and media coverage reveal that both Sweden and Finland have been gradually changing their foreign policy preferences and

raising their defense spending in the timeline while abstaining from provoking Russia abruptly. This foreign policy strategy resulted in a gradual shift in public opinion about security concerns, and finally about NATO membership which was triggered by the very obvious reality, of invasion.

According to publicly available data published by the Ministry of Defence of Sweden and Finland, there has been a noticeable shift in public sentiment towards NATO membership in these countries, accompanied by a concomitant increase in defense expenditures, as is evident from the graphics below:



(Source: www.statista.com Defense expenditure as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) of Finland from 2011 to 2022)



(Source: www.statista.com Military expenditure in Sweden from 2011 to 2021)

Conclusion

Objectively, we examined the changes in foreign policy preferences and public opinion in Sweden and Finland which are traditionally remained non aligned until the invasion of Ukraine. The results indicate a shift in these societies characterized by a changing perspective on NATO membership and heightened security concerns. This shift reflects a reconfiguration, in security dynamics and emphasizes how geopolitical events can significantly influence national foreign policy and public sentiment.

Our analysis suggests that the war, between Russia and Ukraine has had an impact on the way Sweden and Finland assess their security. Historically these countries have been committed to staying neutral in matters. They are now reassessing their security policies due to increased threats. Our research indicates that public opinion plays a role in this reassessment with more people expressing support for NATO membership following aggression. The change in sentiment can be attributed, at partially to government communication and media coverage. This highlights the relationship between sentiment and policy making, in democratic societies.

The theoretical implications of our research contribute to our understanding of how public opinion can play a role, in driving policy changes in the context of foreign policy. Consistent with studies our findings reveals that public opinion in response to significant external events has the potential to exert substantial influence, on government policies. This influence is mediated by the way governments communicate and how the media portrays these events, which ultimately shape perception and preferences regarding policies.

Our research shows that non-aligned countries can change their foreign policy orientations rapidly when crises occur. Unsurprisingly, escalated military tensions have huge impacts

on the public perceptions of war. As we recently witnessed another example of this fact in Germany, the education minister suggested to informing pupils in middle and high schools on war in Ukraine and the potential threats. Before the war, this suggestion would seriously criticized in Germany. There are countless of examples of these cases all around the world which supporting our thesis. The case of Sweden and Finland moving towards NATO because of security concerns and public moods best illustrates this tendency among others. This is particularly germane in Europe where the ongoing fighting between Russia and Ukraine has necessitated re-evaluation of defense strategies as well as realignment of alliances.

This shift in both foreign policy preferences and public opinion in Sweden and Finland highlights the flexibility national security strategies have in response to global changes. It reflects how popular sentiment influences foreign policy, especially within democracies where governments act in accordance with the will of the people. In general, our study contributes to the literature on how public opinion interacts with foreign-policy making, providing valuable insights about major international incidents leading to adjustments in foreign policies. Its implications are far reaching, signaling possibly a broad transformation of European security framework amidst increasing threats and uncertainties.

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