European Security

From variation to convergence in turbulent times – foreign and security policy choices among the Nordics 2014–2023

Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren & Anna Michalski

To cite this article: Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren & Anna Michalski (2024) From variation to convergence in turbulent times – foreign and security policy choices among the Nordics 2014–2023, European Security, 33:1, 21-43, DOI: 10.1080/09662839.2023.2221185

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2023.2221185

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

View supplementary material

Published online: 13 Jun 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 1272

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
From variation to convergence in turbulent times – foreign and security policy choices among the Nordics 2014–2023

Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren and Anna Michalski

The Nordic states have long made distinct choices regarding foreign and security policy principles. However, since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, we are witnessing a convergence of the Nordic countries’ general patterns of cooperation within their security policies. We argue that the challenging international context has led to heightened threat perceptions, triggering a reformulation of their foreign policy roles. Based on this assumption the article aims to analyse the convergence of the Nordic countries’ foreign and security policies by tracing changes in their foreign policy roles following Russia’s increasing aggressiveness. We trace the changes in the Nordic countries’ foreign policy roles through three dimensions: the changes to the international order, threat perceptions and perceptions of reduced manoeuvrability in international affairs. Our empirical analysis sheds light on how all Nordic countries perceive an increasing threat to the multilateral rule-based order, which has consequences for the roles of these states, how the threat perceptions of the Nordic states have been on high alert since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, and finally how this has significantly impacted the Nordic foreign policy elites’ perception of their countries’ ability to manoeuvre and conduct autonomous foreign policy, motivating radical changes in the roles.

CONTACT Douglas Brommesson douglas.brommesson@lnu.se

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.
Treaty Organization (NATO), and in the different degrees of importance attached to Nordic cooperation and loyalty to the US (Rokkan 1981, Grendstad 2003). Three countries – Iceland, Norway and Denmark – have been members of NATO since 1949, while Finland and Sweden remained militarily non-allied until their applications for NATO membership in 2022. Denmark became an EU member in 1973, while Finland and Sweden joined in 1995. Finland adopted the euro in 1999, while Sweden and Denmark have thus far not joined the common currency. Regarding the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Denmark opted out from its military dimension between 1992 and 2022. Norway and Iceland have refrained from joining the EU altogether, although they are part of the European Economic Area (EEA) and other security policy initiatives. Regarding Nordic cooperation, the positions vary, with Finland and Sweden emphasising the Nordic dimension in their security policy, Norway and Iceland doing so to a lesser degree, and Denmark tending to see the Nordic dimension as a third-order priority (Brommesson 2018). In contrast, Denmark is “best in class” among the Nordic countries in terms of support for American foreign policy, including frequent participation in US-led military operations worldwide (Mariager and Wivel 2019).

In previous studies, the diverging patterns in security and foreign policy have been explained by historical experiences (Tiilikainen 2006, Haugevik and Sending 2020), and to a lesser degree by aspects of culture (Grendstad 2003) and identity (Haugevik and Sending 2020). Historical experiences are important aspects of evolving national identities. Such experiences have moulded into distinct configurations in individual countries, acting as prisms through which national foreign policy elites interpret international events and assess appropriate actions (Tiilikainen 2006, Haugevik and Sending 2020). Based on such experiences, Kristin Haugevik and Ole Sending contend that each Nordic country has developed a unique set of repertoires in the form of “niche strategies to signal their own distinctiveness” (Haugevik and Sending 2020, p. 111).

Nonetheless, since the beginning of the 2020s, we have been witnessing a growing convergence of the Nordic countries’ foreign and security policy sparked by the increasing Russian aggressiveness in the region, culminating with the invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The convergence indicates that the Nordic countries are becoming more alike in terms of the patterns of engagement with the EU and NATO (cf. Bennet 1991). Most notable are the Finnish and Swedish governments’ rapprochement to NATO, Denmark’s opt-in to the defence dimensions of the EU, and Norway’s decision to move closer to the core of NATO. There are also signs of growing importance accorded to security cooperation among the Nordic countries (Brøgger 2022). This sudden reorientation in foreign and security policy of the Nordic countries begs the question of how this development should be understood in light of the fact that the historical experiences have not changed. We contend that the reorientation is triggered by the geopolitical shift and the growing insecurity in northern Europe, which is eliciting significant change in how the Nordic countries interpret their historical experiences in regard to their self-understandings and assessments of threats to their national security.

In this article, we ask how the apparent convergence in foreign and security policy of the Nordic states is preconditioned by a more deep-seated change in foreign policy roles. We take as our point of departure the geopolitical shift in the European security order, as evidenced by Russia’s growing aggressiveness in northern Europe, culminating with the fullscale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The challenging international context has given rise
to heightened threat perceptions, which in return have led to a reorientation of the Nordic countries’ foreign policy roles. With the help of Role Theory, we analyse changes in the national role conceptions (NRC) of the Nordic countries by tracing the evolution of domestic elite perceptions in three dimensions: the shift in the international system, security threats and the state’s room for manoeuvre. The aim of the article is twofold: to establish what kind of change has occurred in the NRCs of the Nordic states; and to examine the extent to which change in NRCs has been accompanied by a convergence in their foreign and security policy orientation. Our ambition is to add nuance as well as substance to the observation of convergence in Nordic foreign and security policies by evaluating whether the changes to foreign policy roles are premised on similar threat perceptions and perceived challenges to deep-seated identities.

A shifting international order, threat perceptions and foreign policy role change

Role Theory has been lauded for its multifaceted analytical framework which has the capacity to bridge the division between structure and agency in foreign policy analysis (Elgström and Smith 2006). This study of the foreign and security policy roles of the Nordic countries is based on an assumption that a systemic security pressure leads to an adjustment in NRCs. The adjustment is triggered by a shared appreciation of the threats experienced by these countries in terms of a worsened security situation and a challenge to norms and values which are constituent components to their role conceptions. Observations of changing foreign and security policies indicate that the Nordic countries are adjusting their NRCs in a similar direction but whether this translates into a converging foreign and security policy orientation remains unanswered. In order to disentangle the variation in policy adjustments we need to link systemic pressure to changes in the constitutive dimensions of NRCs and translate this into a process of policy adjustment on the domestic level initiated by national elites. This enables us to trace the direction of perceived threat perceptions (convergence) to displays of a varying reorientation in the enactment of foreign and security policy.

Based on prior studies on the foreign policy variation among the Nordic countries, we infer that these states’ historical experiences have led to unique national identities, which form the bases of foreign and security policy repertoires expressed in the NRCs (Haugevik and Sending 2020). In Role Theory, NRCs are the foundation for a state’s understanding of itself and how it relates to other states in the international system. They are “social positions (…) that are constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organised group” (Harnisch 2011, p. 8). The ego dimension of NRCs is based on the collective understanding of a state’s history, values and place in the world, which informs the elites’ understanding of the state’s material resources, culture and traditions (Thies and Breuning 2012), whereas the alter dimension reflects other states’ appreciation of the status and resources of the former. Both the ego and alter dimensions contain expectations of a state’s behaviour on the international level, which for small states have been couched in varying forms of accommodation: hiding, shelter-seeking and hedging (Kuik 2021, Breuning 2017, Wivel 2021). The enactment of NRCs is linked to the conduct of foreign and security policy by providing policymakers with roadmaps, which according to Holsti concern “the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules
and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system” (Holsti 1970, pp. 245–246). The performative dimension is important to small states as they must respond to both ego and alter expectations regarding their international roles, which hold prescriptions about how they ought to behave as well as the room for manoeuvre available to them, given their limited resources, to play their role. The domestic elite holds ideas about what is possible (cf. “repertoires” above and below), but those might change if the international system becomes more threatening and subsequently accords less room to small states for achieving their roles. In such an environment, small states might adjust their foreign and security policy in accordance with the elite’s assessment of the nature of the threats and the room for manoeuvre available in terms of membership in, or cooperation with, alliances of varying kinds.

In the empirical analysis below, we trace the changes in the Nordic countries’ NRCs through changing role conceptions in three dimensions. The first dimension concerns the elites’ appreciation of the changes to the international order and the challenges that this shift poses to the countries’ international role. It concerns the ego part of the NRC, i.e. how the country sees its place in the international system, and also reflects on the alter part, i.e. how this self-perception is received by others. For the Nordic states, one central part of the roadmap is the small state predicament of limited material resources. Anders Wivel (2021, pp. 494–495) has described this in terms of small states having to choose between “hiding”, i.e. opting out and seeking neutrality, or “shelter-seeking”, i.e. looking for protection from a great power through an alliance or a defence agreement. The liberal international order made it possible for small states to conduct relatively autonomous foreign and security policies drawing on their self-identity as normative internationalists. However, if international structures change and become less generous, small states might experience diminished room for autonomy, and integration into different forms of security cooperation, i.e. shelter-seeking, may safeguard some room for manoeuvre (cf. Thorhallsson 2018). In such a context, domestic foreign policy elites must evaluate the implications of the changing conditions for the existing NRCs, which might lead to a process of role change. Harnisch (2011) argues that sources of role change may be external, internal or both. A transformation process can therefore be triggered by the pressures emanating from the changing international structure, the unexpected behaviour of great powers or actions taken by individuals or groups within the state.

The shift in the international order and the behaviour of significant states, whether acting aggressively or simply breaking established norms and principles of international engagement, is perceived as threatening by small states. This brings us to the second dimension: threat perceptions emanating from a changing international system and how they are understood in terms of threats to self-identity and security needs. In the context of a worsened international security situation, particularly in the event of polarisation among states in antagonistic power positions, such as between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, small states find themselves having to take sides and, therefore, the space to manoeuvre for autonomous foreign policymaking becomes smaller. Nevertheless, we believe such structural explanations are somewhat reductive in their propensity to accord little agency to small states. Therefore, we argue that although the space to manoeuvre might be shrinking, the precise way in which small
states respond to strategic imperatives might be a function of their perceptions of the pressure from the international environment, including security threats, and an evaluation of their material and immaterial resources, which impacts on their ability to conduct foreign and security policy. The impact of a trigger on the elites’ choices of foreign policy reorientation can be very strong, as documented by Wolf (2011) in the case of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US. Such triggering events often cause role change as a new foreign policy consensus emerges with an impact on the identity level (the NRC) and foreign and security policy conduct (role enactment).

The process of re-evaluation of NRCs is unique to each state and therefore there will be variation in the choices made in regard to foreign and security policy, although the room for a varied repertoire of foreign policy identities and the attendant NRCs tends to become more limited in a hostile international climate. Previous studies support this assumption by pointing to the Nordic states’ ability, admittedly in different ways, to play the role of norm entrepreneurs (Björkdahl 2008) or mid-power internationalists (Brommesson 2018) under favourable structural conditions, but return to small state roles of security consumers (ibid.) when “the material context within which role conceptions [...] emerge and evolve” become more demanding (Hyde-Price 2018, p. 437). This is corroborated by Rikard Bengtsson, who found that when the Nordic states face a similar threat, their foreign and security policies tend to move in a similar direction (Bengtsson 2020). Therefore, we expect states to narrow their focus in times of uncertainty and concentrate on the state’s security. NRCs will play an important role in choosing the course of action in these circumstances. Nevertheless, questions remain regarding the precise form the re-orientation will take, the trajectories the Nordic countries will embark upon, and the foreign policy repertoires they will adopt, which only careful study of foreign policy change in the Nordic countries can answer. This brings us to the third dimension, which concerns the perceptions of reduced manoeuvrability in international affairs. Traditional security alliances, such as NATO, or political alliances, such as the EU, and Nordic cooperation, offer possibilities to mitigate security threats but also have an impact on the room to manoeuvre for national foreign and security policy.

In this study, we focus on the elite’s perception of threats in the three dimensions discussed, which have an impact on the self-identification of the Nordic countries and their foreign policy roles. In this, we align with Nabers’ take on the co-constitution of roles and identity in a two-way process and his argument that role change is reflected in the perception of “the intersubjective structures that supply roles with meaning” (Nabers 2011, p. 82). We contend that threat perceptions, whether diffuse or imminent, constitute important intersubjective structures in the thinking of elites who formulate and justify foreign policy choices in response to threats according to their perceived severity. If the threat to the state is existential, it will lead to a transformative role change, affecting both the identity and material dimensions and the appropriate action to mitigate the threat. In contrast, if the threat is perceived as less severe, role change might be more limited, resulting in role adjustment and a less significant foreign policy reorientation.

**A note on methods**

We trace the process of change in the NRCs of four Nordic states: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, from the mid-2010s to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in
During this period, the international environment grew more challenging due to powers such as China and Russia refusing to align with the rules-based international order, culminating with Russia’s outright aggression towards Ukraine. We map the NRCs in four Nordic countries, focusing on perceptions of change in the international order and how these changes pose challenges to the countries’ international roles (first dimension), threat perceptions emerging from a new security context (second dimension), and perceptions of reduced manoeuvrability in international affairs (third dimension). Within the third dimension we include cooperation within EU, NATO and Nordic forums, and the consequences in terms of increased manoeuvrability or reduced independence.

In an analysis of the three dimensions we refer to interviews with foreign policy elites, official documents, such as annual foreign policy declarations, key documents on foreign and security policy, bi- or multilateral agreements, and speeches by prime ministers, foreign ministers and defence ministers. Our unique set of elite interviews centres around the same three themes, permitting us to go beyond official statements and ask more in-depth questions about the process leading up to new policy positions and roles. During 2022 and early 2023, we conducted 38 interviews (with 8 Danish, 12 Finnish, 6 Norwegian and 12 Swedish informants). These informants are part of the foreign and security policy elites in the Nordic countries; more precisely, members of political parties and parliament with extensive experience in foreign or security policy, as well as senior diplomats and civil servants. The more numerous interviews with Finnish and Swedish officials are justified by the dramatic security policy reorientation in 2022. All interviews were semi-structured, based on an interview guide organised around world views and changes in the international order, role conceptions, threat perceptions and role change (see Appendix 2). The guide included open-ended questions. The interviewed individuals were promised full anonymity and can therefore not be quoted with their names. However, for sake of transparency, we indicate their nationality and occupation in general terms (see Appendix 1 for a coded list). They have given their consent.

Mapping Nordic national role conceptions and the consequences of a changing international system

Moving to the empirical analysis, we trace changes in the NRCs of the Nordic countries according to the three dimensions discussed above: the international context, threat perceptions and the countries’ views on how to improve the room for manoeuvre through membership of alliances, chiefly the EU and NATO.

The international context and how it relates to national foreign policy roles

Starting with Denmark, the weakening of the international rules-based system is seen as the single most significant aspect of change in the international system (DK 2 DK4, DK5 2022). It has come about because certain powers, chiefly Russia and China, do not share the norms and principles of the multilateral, rules-based international order, as they pursue a power-based international order to secure access to raw materials, control international value chains and acquire technological advantages. China’s and Russia’s status as authoritarian states, which do not respect human rights and the rule
of law, is significant for the Danish view of future challenges. The Social Democratic government, which came to power in 2019, pledged to adopt a value-based diplomatic strategy in defence of national interest and the norms which underpin Danish society (Danish Government 2022). However, the experience of the Trump administration between 2016 and 2020 was truly confusing for the Danes as the American president undermined important principles of the rules-based international order by tearing up international agreements and weakening international organisations, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and NATO, and by questioning the very existence of the EU. The election of President Biden in 2019 is seen as a temporary reversal of two deep-seated trends in American politics, namely the polarisation of the political landscape – “We don’t know which of Trump or Biden is the parenthesis. This is a big challenge for the Europeans” (DK4 2022) – and the tilt to the Asia-Pacific region, which has a significant impact on Denmark’s foreign policy role as a staunch ally of the US (DK2 2022). Denmark still sees the US as its primary security ally. As a result of Russia’s war in Ukraine, it is seeking a bilateral defence agreement which could include placing US troops on Danish territory (DK6 2022). Likewise, Denmark is still keen on portraying itself as a core player in NATO. Even though Denmark’s role as an ally of the US and its ambition to be a core player in NATO can be seen as parts of the same transatlantic role, it is interesting to observe how the latter is related to a widened concept of a European pillar within NATO (DK1 2022, see also below).

The challenge to the rules-based international order has led to a profound reconsideration of Danish foreign policy and the attendant role conceptions (Taksøe-Jensen 2016). The reluctance of revisionist powers to uphold the multilateral trading system, their breaches of human rights, and their propensity to engage in cyber attacks and industrial espionage have changed the trade-off between commercial and security interests. Denmark has traditionally identified itself with the role as trading power, alongside its role as a staunch US ally. That “Denmark’s defence secures Danish trade” was famously depicted by the Maersk shipping company next to a Danish frigate (DK1 2022). In the quest to secure commercial interests, Denmark formerly considered China “a very important trading partner which should not be crossed”. However, this approach has changed, and it is now “legitimate to criticise China” (DK8 2022). The strategic partnership with China “has expired but lives on because no one wants to declare it defunct and not add anything new to it either” (DK5 2022). The rivalry between China and the US has put Denmark (as a staunch ally of the latter) in a difficult position since active engagement in the Indo-Pacific stretches Danish resources too far (DK3 2022). However, Denmark participates in European efforts to keep maritime sea routes free from piracy and seeks American partnership in shoring up its role as an Arctic power against unwanted Chinese involvement in the region (DK4 2022).

Moving on to how Norway perceives changes in the international order and its foreign policy roles, we see how the country perceives itself as a small state, and as such, Norway, just like Denmark, has, and has had, a strong interest in a predictable international order and strong support for international law (Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2020-2021, NOR1 2022). The United Nations (UN) is an important international organisation that provides an institutional setting for the development of and support for international law (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17). In our interviews, the concern regarding a more unstable international order becomes clear, just as in Denmark. More recently, Russia’s war in Ukraine, uncertain signals from a polarised US during the Trump
administration, and a more assertive and authoritarian China confront Norway with new security threats (NOR1, NOR2, NOR3, NOR4, NOR5, 2022). Despite mounting threats, the interviewees in Norway strongly emphasise stability, as opposed to change (as emphasised in Denmark), in Norway’s foreign and security policy.

Given Norway’s historical experiences, not least during the Second World War when its neutrality did not provide any security against German occupation, Norway’s relationship with NATO is seen as the most fundamental and defining aspect of Norway’s security policy (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020, NOR3 2022). During our interviews, some diplomats seemed hesitant about whether NATO will remain equally important if the US turns more towards Asia and South America. But so far, no change has occurred in Norway’s loyalty to NATO (NOR2 2022). Norway continues to play the role of a loyal, committed and trustworthy NATO member. Norway also highlights its European role, even though it cannot be equated with being an EU member. As an EU non-member, the transatlantic link and membership of NATO largely define Norway’s most important foreign policy role (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17, NOR2, NOR4 2022).

Another arena taking a prominent place in Norwegian foreign policy is the High North, with a declared interest in taking on a special responsibility, as expressed in the High North Strategy from 2006. The purpose was to present a more coherent High North focus and to “create sustainable growth and development” (The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006). According to the strategy, Norway saw a growing importance of the High North for Norway, for its relationship with Russia and the whole of northern Europe (The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006). This includes strategic issues concerning Russia and the sustainable use of marine resources. Norway aimed to be “the best steward of the environment and natural resources in the High North” (The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006), which can be interpreted as playing the role of a green mediator. The petroleum resources in the Barents Sea added further interest to the region. According to the High North strategy, the Norwegian government should act as “prime mover and facilitator” (ibid.). Hence, Norway’s role in the High North would be more active, sustainable and responsible, and a link between Russia and NATO. Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, this strategy is on hold for the foreseeable future.

While Denmark and Norway have placed membership of NATO at the core of their most important foreign and security roles, the situation is different for Finland and Sweden. Still, since the end of the Cold War, both countries have moved closer to the West and with the Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the attack on Eastern Ukraine in the same year, the orientation to the West intensified. During interviews with the Finnish elite, this move is confirmed and described as deliberate, although the reorientation has always been conducted with caution (FIN3, FIN4, FIN5, FIN6 2022). Following the end of the Cold War, Finland started to integrate with European security structures and became a member of the EU in 1995. Soon Finland adopted the role of a devoted European at the core of the EU. During this period, Finland also developed an increasingly deeper partnership with NATO (FIN6 2022). Still, Finland continued to emphasise the need for a functioning, working relationship with Russia, keeping the communication channel open and maintaining a good relationship with Russia (FIN2 2022). Therefore, Finland has, up until 2022, only moved as close to the West as possible without upsetting Russia too much (FIN4 2022). Given the need to balance Western loyalty and uphold communication
with Russia, full integration within the core of the EU was early on seen as possible, while full membership in NATO was not. Finland, supported by other European states, has maintained its role as a *communicator, or bridge builder, between East and West* (FIN2 2022). Even after the war in Georgia in 2008 and increasing Russian aggressiveness, Finland still pursued the same balancing act and cooperated with Russia on practical matters (FIN4 2022). Simultaneously, Finland expressed support for being “a bastion of Western defence” (Alberque and Schreer 2022, p. 66). An example of the balancing act and the desire to act as a communicator between West and East appeared as late as 2021 in the run-up to the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and the “Spirit of Helsinki”. In an op-ed in March 2021, Niinistö expressed hopes for revitalising the “Spirit of Helsinki” and put forward the idea of an Arctic summit with the participation of Russia and the USA (Pesu and Vanhanen 2021, cf. FIN3, FIN5 2022). At the same time, our interviewees describe this as a matter of “handling something that really cannot be handled” (FIN6, FIN4 2022). And, as we will see below, since the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the effort to emphasise the “Spirit of Helsinki” is gone for the foreseeable future, something that also raises concerns among senior representatives in Finland as they see the risk of increasing tension over time (FIN 4, FIN5 2022).

In the Swedish case, officials had already in 2008 made a prognosis of a changing international order with a more assertive Russia that would put pressure on the stability in Europe (Brommesson 2015). The perception in Sweden of a stable international order had earlier motivated a role of a *devoted internationalist*, with strong support to the UN, but also support for international missions. However, even after 2008, some political groups in Sweden’s elite envisaged a continued stable order, not least in the decision in 2009 to end general conscription. Still, after 2014 the weakening of the rule-based international order by Russia’s and China’s recourse to weaponised interdependence by economic means is recognised in our interviews as a key change in the international context (SWEB3, SWEB4, SWEM1, SWEM2, SWEE1, SWEE2 2022). These developments eventually changed the Swedish foreign policy elite’s understanding of the nature of the international order from stable to confrontational.

The weakening international order, with Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, along with its support to separatists in Eastern Ukraine, led to the reconstruction of the Swedish armed forces, the reintroduction of conscription and the conclusion of several bilateral agreements concerning defence cooperation (SWEBE1). The most important of these is the agreement with Finland that takes the form of operative defence cooperation beyond peacetime (Haglund and Hultqvist 2015). The erratic behaviour of the US during the Trump administration and its criticism of multilateralism led to uncertainty in Sweden (SWEM1 2022). However, this did not conflict with the desire of Sweden to seek closer security cooperation with the US. Still, Trump’s anti-multilateral agenda made a strong UN more unlikely (SWEE2 2022). For Sweden, like the other Nordic countries, the emphasis on a predictable international order has remained at the forefront of the foreign policy agenda. In light of this, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is seen as an outright violation of the rules-based order and is therefore strongly condemned (Swedish Government 2022a, Swedish Government 2022b, SWEBE1 2023).

Swedish governments have, to varying degrees, emphasised both the EU and UN as important actors in the overall security order. However, the precise balance between the two has varied among governments and over time (SWEB2, SWEB4, SWEM1,
SWEE2, 2022). During the centre-right government incumbency of 2006–2014, Sweden had an outspoken desire to take on a role as a *core member of the EU* and take on a leading role regarding the EU’s Eastern partnership – a Swedish and Polish initiative in 2007 – as a way to build stable and democratic institutions in Eastern Europe (SWEB6). When the left-wing government took office in 2014, the balance tilted in favour of the UN, with a renassaince of a role as a more *autonomous internationalist*. Sweden sought membership in the UN Security Council and won a seat for the 2017–2018 period (Ekengren and Möller2021). At the same time, the importance of the EU in Eastern Europe was somewhat downplayed (SWEB3, SWEB4 2022). Still, even during the social-democratic era, the EU continued to be described as an important arena for foreign policymaking, and membership in the EU provided Sweden with strength (SWEE2 2022). The new right-wing government of 2022 has once again signalled a return to a foreign policy focusing more on the role as a core member of the EU. These two roles have often been combined, and what is different is the balance between the two.

**Threat perceptions and how foreign policy roles are presented**

Against the backdrop of the broader changes to the international system, Denmark has recalibrated its threat perceptions, which are now seen as emanating primarily from Russia’s growing aggressiveness in North-Eastern Europe, particularly in the Baltic Sea region (Danish Government 2022). The threat became apparent to the Danish foreign policy elite, which historically have had good relations with Russia up to the time of the annexation of Crimea (DK4 2022). The invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, preceded by incursions of Russian air fighter jets in Finnish, Swedish and Baltic airspace, confirmed the perception of Russia as a revisionist power. The growing security threats in the Baltic Sea region and Eastern Europe have profoundly altered Denmark’s security strategy, from prioritising NATO’s out-of-area missions and its role as “able and willing to support US war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq and instead redirect its military resources to territorial defence and security in its neighbourhood” (DK1, DK8 2022, Regeringens sikkerhedspolitiske analysegruppe 2022). Former Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen believed firmly “that foreign policy is about ideas and the willingness to fight for ideas” and consequently took some controversial decisions (DK6, 2022). Military activism and loyalty to the US were strong across the political aisle, and in 2014 it took the government of Helle Thorning-Schmidt “24 h to go to war in Libya” – a decision regarded as “hyper ideological” (ibid.). However, the focus on the role as a *staunch ally of the US* at almost any price is now moderated by the view that the European security architecture must be preserved through a clearer role for the European pillar in NATO, a stronger role for the EU, and possibly rejuvenated Nordic defence cooperation within NATO (Danish Government 2022) strengthening a *European role* in Danish foreign policy.

Also, in Norway, Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 is believed to have had significant and long-term security consequences and hence for Norwegian threat perceptions (NOR1, NOR2, NOR4 2022). Besides this more conventional military threat, Norway also acknowledges that its security is affected by more unconventional threats such as terrorism, organised crime, piracy, low state capacity, migration, hybrid warfare, etc. Threats towards Norway have been described as more complex and encompassing, comprising many actors and crossing traditional borders (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014-15, NOR4 2022). Altogether, these threats have been regarded as a dangerous cocktail of factors leading to increasing instability and uncertainty. Besides strengthening Norway’s core role as a loyal NATO member, contributing to traditional defence within the NATO frame, Norway expressed the need to participate in different foreign aid and competence-building activities to build security together with others (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014-15).

In recent years, Norway has emphasised traditional military threat (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17; Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2020-2021). Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the starting point for deteriorating relations with Russia. The security situation was described as “very severe”, and “state sovereignty had been challenged” by Russia’s military actions (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17). Given the severe security situation in Europe, Norway’s interest in the EU as a security provider had grown. At the same time, the EU faced a challenging time because of Brexit. The US changed its foreign and security policy under Trump’s presidency, which meant a challenge for the transatlantic partnership (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17). All in all, Norway’s role as a loyal NATO member has never been publicly questioned, but several senior officials acknowledge the challenge Trump’s presidency constituted for Norway (NOR1, NOR2, NOR3, NOR4 2022). If the US withdrew from NATO, the foundation of Norway’s most important foreign policy role would wither away. The awareness of Norway’s exposure, and maybe the hope of only one mandate for Trump, led to continued support for Norway’s role as a loyal and dedicated NATO member.

Given its geopolitical position in the North, Norway emphasises its role as NATO’s representative in this region. It has shown increased sensitivity to performing new tasks within the NATO membership frame (NOR4 2022). There are clear signs that Russia views these as instances of a general build-up of NATO’s presence in the High North (Hjermann and Wilhelmsen 2021). There have also been signs of a domestic debate in Norway on whether Norway is focusing too much on deterrence and not enough on reassurance. Being a loyal NATO member might here clash with Norway’s wish to play the role of the mediator of the High North. This may, however, have changed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with fewer opportunities to mediate.

For Finland, its security is seen as being tied to the stability of the European security order (FIN1, FIN6). One interviewee argues that Finland has long based its security policy on a good relationship with Russia, and therefore Finland continued to cooperate with Russia, when possible, to try to build security (FIN2). With Russia’s invasion of Ukraine the threat perceptions changed dramatically and Russia became a clear threat, a threat that made the working relationship with Russia impossible (FIN2, FIN3, FIN 4). This threat called for a renewed focus on crisis management, and for Finland to “be prepared for the worst” (FIN3). Another way the new threat perceptions were expressed was by emphasising Finland’s “NATO option”, a feature in Finnish foreign and security policy according to which membership in NATO has been seen as an option if the security situation deteriorates. Even though Finland has expressed this NATO option since the 1990s, the country has hesitated regarding the final step to full membership in the alliance, since this could have been seen as a potentially destabilising step (FIN3 2022). Still, Finland gradually moved closer to NATO, thus opening bilateral cooperation with the US and other NATO members. The Finnish bilateral defence cooperation with Sweden has also stood out and has been motivated against the background of new threat perceptions. In 2015, the two militarily non-
aligned Nordic states officially started to plan for operative military cooperation beyond peacetime, bordering on a defence alliance (FIN 3, FIN 9, FIN 10 2022, Ojanen and Raunio 2018, cf. Finnish Government 2020). For some, this arrangement, with bilateral agreements with the US and other NATO members, was before 2022 seen as an alternative to NATO membership (FIN3 2022; FIN12 2023) without causing too much upset in Moscow (FIN4 2022), and not increasing the threat of a more unstable security order.

At the same time, Finland has remained loyal to the EU sanctions against Russia, according to its role as a devoted European, and Finland also became one of the most active proponents of Article 42.7 and the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (see Pesu in Fägersten 2020). The need to emphasise EU solidarity could be seen as an expression of a perception of an increasing external threat.

With a clearer threat perception emanating from Russia after the annexation of Crimea, Swedish–Finnish bilateral cooperation acquired a “special place” in Swedish foreign and security policy (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). Cooperation with Finland became a central tenet of the renaissance of Nordic cooperation in Swedish foreign policy during the 2010s (Brommesson 2018). For the more pro-NATO part of the political establishment, Nordic cooperation, and other bilateral forms of cooperation, including the US and the UK, was welcomed but was not seen as an alternative to NATO membership (SWEB1). The different views on how to seek security in an uncertain situation led to a public inquiry on alternatives to international cooperation, including the possibility of membership in NATO (Swedish Government 2016). At the time, the inquiry did not result in any clear recommendation on what steps the new threat perception required.

The emphasis on the Nordic dimension allowed Sweden to balance contributions to major European integration processes, whether within the EU or NATO, with a more autonomous foreign policy. At a minimum, it was perceived as a way to balance Sweden’s participation in such European integration efforts. With a new left-leaning government in 2014, Sweden’s autonomous internationalist role was further underlined, with examples such as the declaration of a feminist foreign policy and the unilateral recognition of Palestine. Autonomy also manifested itself in the more hesitant attitude towards taking on a leadership role within the EU, for example, in the previous Swedish favourite project, the Eastern Partnership (SWEB4 2022). However, membership in the EU continued to play an important role in Swedish foreign and security policy, even though its importance was less emphasised (SWEE1 2002).

Still, after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the need for further steps was motivated against the background of new threat perceptions. In a report by the Swedish Foreign Ministry dated 13 May, in which all parliamentary parties had taken part, a “new” and “changed” threat assessment was presented because of Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine. Neither existing bilateral security arrangements nor the EU’s security dimensions were deemed sufficient to provide Sweden with security in the event of an attack against Sweden (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022, pp. 7–8).

Enhancing the room to manoeuvre in a changing security context and the impact on foreign policy roles

Danish foreign policy elites have sought new ways to secure space to manoeuvre in a changing international system through membership of existing alliances and
organisations. This reorientation, undertaken under the banner of a foreign policy that secures Danish interests, is much influenced by the US thinking on promoting an alliance among democracies, as seen, for instance, in Biden’s Summit of Democracies (DK5 2022). It has been led by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, who has demonstrated increasingly strong leadership in foreign and security affairs with a strong orientation towards the US and value-based diplomacy (Danish Government 2022, DK1, DK2 2022).

While the role as staunch US ally remains in place, the clearest reorientation has been undertaken vis-à-vis the EU, whose importance as a non-traditional security provider and a global economic power has been upgraded (DK2 2022). Despite decades-long scepticism and reluctance to engage wholeheartedly in the EU’s foreign and security policy, Denmark now strives to be at the heart of the efforts to strengthen the EU’s strategic autonomy (DK2, DK4 2022). To complete such a shift, the government needed to repeal Denmark’s opt-out from the defence dimension of the CFSP – a measure long sought by the foreign policy elite who thought “[L]et’s get rid of the opt-outs tomorrow” – and eventually achieved it through a referendum held on 1 June 2022. Denmark’s intended move to the core of European integration with a stronger European role is important also in regard to standing up against autocracies regarding human rights and defending the rules-based international order, particularly concerning economic coercion and weaponised interdependence (Regeringens sikkerhedspolitiske analysegruppe 2022). These areas are important for Denmark’s values-based foreign policy and its role as a trading nation because of the EU’s ability to promote values and act as a platform for protecting global public goods: “While the global international organisations are crumbling, the EU and NATO show more coherence than they are credited with. Denmark depends on finding solutions in the EU context” (DK4 2022).

Regarding NATO, in which the US is seen as the foremost security provider, Denmark is increasingly weighing up the possibilities for a European pillar in NATO for the Europeans to be able to ensure their safety, as the US eventually will continue its pivot to the Asia-Pacific (DK2, DK4 2022). The future membership of Sweden and Finland in NATO opens the prospects for much closer Nordic security cooperation within the alliance centred on the Baltic Sea region and the High North, further strengthening Danish core interests and its roles as an Arctic power and a normative-inclined Nordic country, which hitherto has been a quite weak role conception due to very different foreign policy outlooks among the Nordic states (DK2, DK4 2022, cf. Wivel 2018).

In Norway, we can see that when Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 was discussed, it was believed to affect the European security architecture seriously and hence many states had room for manoeuvre. Discussions on how Norway should respond to new emerging threats were almost solely focused on the existing NATO membership (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17) and have continued to be so (NOR5 2022). Norway expressed confidence in Norwegian interests being taken care of within the NATO framework, which made the role of the loyal NATO member the dominant role (Norwegian Ministry of Defence 2020-2021). The transatlantic relationship with the US, as well as the NATO membership, was seen as fundamental for Norway’s foreign policy. But also, the European role and the Nordic role were described as important parts of the Norwegian security and economic framework (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17; 2019; 2020, NOR5 2022). Given Norway’s trade patterns, the roles sum up to a clearly Western outlook (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016-17).
Given the central role of NATO membership in Norway’s foreign and security policy, any foreign policy roles played by Norway must be commensurate with Norway’s NATO membership. Norway wants to be perceived also by others as a loyal and dedicated NATO member (NOR 2, NOS5, NOR6 2022). The Trump administration showed to some extent the vulnerability in this approach, as Norway would suffer a huge security loss if the US had left NATO or diminished its support of the organisation (NOR2 2022). Bilateral cooperation with the UK or Germany, as well as the Nordic cooperation, has to some extent been important for playing a European and a Nordic role. Bilateral agreements have been used to compensate for not being a member of the EU. The increased military threat and the Russian challenge to the multilateral order after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine have confirmed the importance of NATO membership. The heavy focus on NATO and deterrence has led to role conflicts in relation to Norway’s ambition to be seen as a reasonable actor with the role as a mediator in the High North, focusing on sustainability and reassurance vis-à-vis Russia. However, the need to remain within NATO boundaries and to be perceived as a loyal NATO member is considered more important.

The most dramatic changes have been taking place in Finland and Sweden. Starting with Finland, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 made it impossible to continue to combine the Western role with the role of a communicator with Russia, at least if the role of the communicator includes having a functioning working relationship with Russia. As the latent threat perception of an increasingly hostile Russia became explicit, the Finnish leadership quickly drew new conclusions regarding the security situation. David Arter has described it as if a “psychosis of fear among the Finnish public” took hold, with a quick change in public opinion, which made the political decision easier (Arter 2022, p. 2, see also Forsberg 2023 and Lundqvist 2022, pp. 92–93; this is also supported in several interviews: FIN8, FIN9, FIN12 2022). Even if the Finnish president had remained in contact with the Russian president after the invasion to call for peace, the relationship had already changed in fundamental ways (FIN9, 2022). It is fair to say that there was no longer a desire to balance two roles as they were seen as conflicting too much, and the decision to prioritise the Western role became clear from the onset of the war in Ukraine.

Already two months before the Russian invasion, Finnish President Sauli Niinistö addressed the risk of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Finland facing a deteriorating security situation (Niinistö 2022). Once the invasion was a fact, Finland found itself between the old paradigm with a good working relationship with Russia and a new, more developed Western paradigm (FIN2, FIN12 2022). In this potentially dangerous situation, the Finnish government and the president moved quickly and prepared for future membership of NATO. Here Finland moved faster than Sweden, and the initial Swedish ideological declarations against membership were met with confusion in Helsinki (FIN4, FIN6 2022). Soon after the Russian invasion, Niinistö travelled to Washington for consultations with President Biden. After a rapid consultation with the Finnish political parties and a security policy report from the government on the new conditions for Finnish security (Finnish Government 2022), the government decided to apply for membership in May 2022. During the decision-making process, a clear consensus emerged within the Finnish parliament (FIN3 2022). The special relationship with Sweden was considered, and the two countries applied on the same day after Sweden followed Finland and prepared for membership during the spring.
The defence alliance with Sweden was not considered an alternative to NATO as it was not militarily strong enough, nor was the EU seen as a meaningful option given the acute security threat that Finland perceived. Given Finland’s proximity to Russia and historical experiences of war with Russia, the Finns pushed the process forward (FIN5, FIN6, FIN7, cf. Arter 2022, pp. 12–13). A couple of weeks after Russia’s invasion, it was already clear to members of Helsinki’s foreign and security policy elite, and also clear in our interviews in early March 2022, that Finland would apply for membership of NATO, regardless of whether Sweden decided to join (FIN5 2022). According to one senior diplomat, the Finnish government did not want to miss a historic opportunity to apply for membership when Russia occupied Ukraine and NATO still had an open door for new members (FIN6, 2022). From both public statements and our interviews, it is clear that the Finns wanted to move in tandem with Sweden. Still, they had also accepted the possibility of moving forward on their own if this was required in order to become a member of NATO. This was also what happened when Turkey and Hungary refused to ratify the Swedish membership, but accepted Finland as members. Finland therefore became a member of NATO on 4 April 2023, leaving Sweden outside.

In any case, Sweden applied for membership on the same day as Finland, making it possible for the latter to maintain a strong emphasis on the Nordic role and the bilateral relationship with Sweden (Finnish Government2022). Finland also continued to place itself at the core of the EU (ibid.). Through its decision to apply for membership in NATO, and the membership in 2023, Finland has manifested its dominant Western role within an additional dimension of international security cooperation.

In Sweden, the government’s determination to seek membership in NATO was initially not as clear as in the case of Finland. The Swedish red-green government, which came to power in 2014, signalled a focus on the UN and declared a feminist foreign policy, which it complemented with a series of bilateral security partnerships and membership of the EU. Sweden tried to carve out a foreign policy role indicating autonomy and cooperation. This role aimed at building security with others (Wieslander 2022) while maintaining an independent voice. Especially for the Swedish Social Democratic Party, this was an attempt to balance the necessity to cooperate with others to build security with the internal demands for a strong Swedish voice on the international stage (SWEB1, SWEB3, 2022, SWEBE1, 2023). There are signs of identity signalling on both sides of the debate. Non-alignment remained an important part of Swedish identity for those who favoured it. At the same time, those who wanted Sweden to seek membership in NATO emphasised Sweden’s role as a Western state, culturally and economically (Hagström 2022).

With the war in Ukraine and the rapid Finnish reorientation towards membership of NATO, the Swedish government was not left with much choice but to move in tandem with Finland. Right after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Swedish government did not acknowledge a possibility of Swedish membership of NATO. However, after a clear signal from Finland of a changed policy position, in March Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson no longer ruled out the possibility of membership (SVT 2022). This was the start of the Social Democratic party’s reorientation process, conducted without much enthusiasm (SWEB4, SWE2 2022). In a report by the Swedish Foreign Ministry dated 13 May, in which all parliamentary parties had taken part, a “new” and “changed” threat assessment was presented due to Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine. Neither existing bilateral security arrangements nor the EU’s security
dimensions were deemed sufficient to provide Sweden with security in the event of an attack against Sweden (Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022, pp. 7–8). On 16 May, the government decided to apply for membership. Since then, membership in NATO became the only viable option to guarantee security and ward off a potential future attack by Russia. Still, our interviewees also indicate that they see a renewed importance of the EU in the overall European security architecture, in which Sweden should play an important role (SWEM1 2022). There are also mentions of the possibility that Sweden will become an active NATO member, raising questions about the points on its agenda and actively participating in the working groups to influence the alliance in a direction that is commensurate with the foreign policy objectives of Sweden (SWEE1, SWEE2 2022).

During the spring of 2023 we saw how Sweden was placed in a state of limbo as Finland was accepted as a member of NATO, while Hungary and Turkey refused to ratify the Swedish membership. Finnish interviewees express how Finland has had a limited but clear set of priorities in their foreign policy, with a clear Western role and a devoted European role, and has moved steadily towards membership of NATO. In Helsinki, the Swedish approach is described as more multifaceted (FIN12), something which is recognised also by some of our Swedish interviewees (SWEB6). This multifaceted approach has included an internationalist role, occasionally expressed through vocal criticism. Possibly, this has led to a more delicate position for Sweden compared to that of Finland.

Conclusions: towards converging role conceptions in the Nordic states

We started out with the aim to establish what kind of changes have occurred in the NRCs of the Nordic states and to examine the extent to which changes in NRCs have been accompanied by a convergence in foreign and security policy orientation. In order to achieve our aim in a nuanced manner, our analysis has been structured around three dimensions, covering the elites’ perceptions of the changes to the international order and the challenges that this shift poses to the countries’ international roles, threat perceptions emanating from the changing international system, and perceptions of reduced manoeuvrability in international affairs.

Regarding the international order, all Nordic countries have perceived an increasing challenge to the multilateral rule-based order emanating from Russia’s flagrant breach of international law, China’s lack of commitment to international rules and regulations, and from concerns regarding the polarisation in US politics. The heightened rivalry between China and the US is also problematic for the Nordic countries, as it further diverts the US’s interest from Europe towards Asia. The impact of the geopolitical turn on the Nordic countries’ role conceptions is found in aspects regarding their self-identity. All four countries used to seek closer economic cooperation with China in strategic partnerships, but this is now largely abandoned. Their role conceptions now comprise a worldview depicting a struggle between democracies and autocracies, most explicitly expressed in Denmark’s value-based foreign policy. In the wake of the war in Ukraine, economic sanctions against Russia have disrupted economic relations and weaponised dependence due to Russia’s ban on selling gas to EU countries. For Norway, the role of energy in response to the war in Ukraine has underlined its status as an oil and gas exporter but also the vulnerability of the strategic infrastructure of this sector.
The threat perceptions of the Nordic states have been on high alert since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. Especially for Sweden and Finland, the perception of a security threat is so acute that they abandoned deeply entrenched role conceptions as non-aligned and a communicator with Russia and applied for membership of NATO. Also, for Denmark, Russia’s aggression changed its view on the origins of security threats from failed states and terrorist organisations far afield to the Baltic and Arctic regions much closer to home. All four countries now emphasise territorial defence rather than out-of-area missions. In sum, the acute security threats transformed Sweden’s and Finland’s role conceptions, whereas Denmark’s NRCs were adjusted along long-standing lines and Norway’s focus on its NATO role was confirmed.

The geopolitical shift of the international order and the acute security threats in the North-Eastern territories have significantly impacted the Nordic foreign policy elites’ perception of their countries’ ability to manoeuvre and conduct autonomous foreign policy. Naturally, membership in a regional organisation such as the EU can enhance the ability to manoeuvre by opening new possibilities for integration and cooperation. At the same time, being a member implies that a state must abide by the commitments taken and follow the rules of engagement. Because of the more ominous international climate and the security threats closer to home, all Nordic countries have traded autonomy for integration. Again, Sweden and Finland undertook the most radical shift in foreign policy, abandoning their autonomy in security matters for the safety of membership in NATO. Also, Denmark radically changed its position regarding the EU’s CFSP to see itself as being at the core of EU foreign and security policy.

Interestingly, the significance of membership in the EU has been upgraded in the foreign policies of Finland, Sweden and Denmark, but also Norway to some extent. This concerns the role of the EU in non-conventional warfare, which is seen as complementary to the conventional forces of NATO, but also the strengthening of the European security architecture, with a more autonomous EU. The Nordic foreign policy elites no longer conceive of a choice between NATO and the EU as, in their minds, it is fully conceivable to be active members of both organisations. Being part of the EU makes it possible for Sweden, Finland and Denmark to pursue liberal norms and values in arenas such as the UN Human Rights Council, where autocratic states are increasingly dominating the agenda. Being part of NATO might allow them to maintain a critical stance towards Russia, which would have been risky outside the alliance.

To conclude, the Nordic countries have moved from a rather high degree of variance in foreign and security policy choices towards convergence, i.e. being more alike in terms of patterns of engagement within organisations. Our analysis has uncovered this convergence in perceptions of a challenged multilateral order, due to Russian aggression, Chinese authoritarianism, and US polarisation and in acute threat perceptions. This has motivated closer cooperation within the EU, NATO and to some extent also Nordic institutions. Finally, in terms of room for manoeuvre, all four Nordic countries have traded autonomy for integration. In this regard, our analysis has showed how perceptions in the Nordic states have changed because of a more threatening international environment where they have found less room for achieving autonomous roles. Instead, the Nordic countries have adjusted their policies in order to secure room for manoeuvre, i.e. small state agency, not by staying outside organisations and alliances but by joining them through membership of and closer cooperation with NATO and the EU. Yet, our analysis
also shows that variation in actual policies remains between the four Nordic states in regard to membership in the EU, devotion to NATO, the importance of the UN, and in future, the necessity to rebuild a communication channel with Russia regarding practical day-to-day affairs. While small states have more limited room for manoeuvre in an ominous international environment, agency is still quite extensive due to restored security and closer integration in regional political and military alliances.

**Note**

1. Iceland, the fifth Nordic country, is left out of our analysis for pragmatic reasons. The other four countries are closer to the conflict in Ukraine, and there is more intense debate in these countries on how to reorient their foreign and security policies.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work was supported by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond [grant number P19-0285:1].

**ORCID**

Douglas Brommesson [http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6374-5964](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6374-5964)

**References**


Appendices

Appendix 1. List of interviews

**Denmark**

DK1 2022-02 Senior policymaker
DK2 2022-02 Senior politician
DK3 2022-03 Senior diplomat
DK4 2022-03 Senior diplomat
DK5 2022-03 Senior diplomat and former politician
DK6 2022-03 Senior policymaker
DK7 2022-03 Senior diplomat
DK8 2022-04 Senior analyst

**Finland**

FIN1 2022-02 Senior politician
FIN2 2022-03 Former senior diplomat
FIN 3 2022-03 Senior politician
FIN 4 2022-03 Former senior diplomat
FIN 5 2022-03 Senior civil servant
FIN 6 2022-04 Senior diplomat
FIN 7 2022-11 Senior diplomat
FIN 8 2022-11 Senior diplomat
FIN 9 2022-11 Senior diplomat
FIN 10 2022-11 Senior diplomat
FIN 11 2022-11 Senior civil servant
FIN 12 2023-01 Former senior politician

**Norway**

NO1 2022-02 Former senior diplomat
NO2 2022-02 Senior diplomat
NO3 2022-02 Senior diplomat
NO4 2022-02 Senior politician
NO5 2022-02 Senior diplomat
NO6 2022-02 Senior diplomat

**Sweden**

SWEB1 2022-05 Senior politician
SWEB2 2022-05 Former senior diplomat
SWEB3 2022-10 Senior politician
Appendix 2. Interview guide

World views
How would you describe the current state of international relations in terms of underlying conflicts or challenges?
Looking at the different structural conflicts or challenges, which of these have the strongest influence on the foreign policy of your country?
How do other countries [neighbouring states, EU, great powers] perceive your country? What are the attributes that your country most often is associated with?

National roles
How would you describe the most prominent roles your country is playing in international relations?
If we look back 15 years, have these roles changed in any significant way? Have the roles been reinterpreted over time? If so, can you reflect on the ways these roles have changed and why they changed?
Looking at other states with an interest in your country, what kind of action and behaviour do they expect from your country?
If we look at the present situation, are the positions and policies of your country challenged in any way?

Follow up: How are the positions challenged, can you give us an example?
The positions can be challenged because of external forces (external actors/countries/organisations) or situations, do you see any examples of this?
Another possibility is that the positions are challenged because of internal (domestic) forces or situations, do you see any examples of this?

Looking more closely at the internal pressure that can arise and lead to a changed foreign policy (positions, roles), all government agencies and ministries have their forms of organisation and routines and they are embedded in a political system.
Would you say that there are certain foreign policy actors that tend to initiate the discussion on changed policies or positions (i.e. roles)?

Follow up depending on answer: From your perspective how important are the following kind of actors and structures in order to understand how policies or positions are challenged?
- Political leadership of the ministry on an individual level (i.e. minister/s)
- Political leadership of the government (prime minister)
- Political leadership collectively (the collective government, coalitions)
- Presidential power (Finland)
- Parties (party leaders or foreign policy spokespersons)
- Parliamentarians (MPs in relevant committees, parliamentary leadership of government parties)
- Leading diplomats or other civil servants within relevant ministries
- The routines of relevant ministries
- Public opinion
Would you say that there are parts of the foreign policy decision-making processes in the wider context that are making it easier for change or stability regarding positions and policies?

If contradictory expectations, internally or between internal and external actors, occur regarding your country’s foreign policy positions or policies, what is likely to happen? How will decision-makers deal with contradictory expectations?

Does it matter if the contradictory expectations come from external or internal actors/situations?

Looking closer at external pressure, what room to manoeuvre do you think your country has in order to pursue its preferred policies or positions? From your perspective, how important are the following kinds of actors in order to understand how policies or positions are challenged?

- Great powers
- Other states
- International organisations

**Implementation**

Think of a situation when a new foreign policy role or a redefined role develops and is received by other countries and international organisations. If one would like to understand the success of that process, what factors determine whether your state succeeds in establishing a new or redefined role at the international level?