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**THE CHANGED NATO PERCEPTIONS -  
STUDY OF SWEDEN, FINLAND, AND  
NORWAY 2014–2022**

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# ABSTRACT

Paavali Koivula: The Changed NATO perceptions – Study of Sweden, Finland, and Norway  
Master's thesis  
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The Russian attack on Ukraine caused a shift in the European security environment. Due to that shift, longstanding militarily non-aligned countries Sweden and Finland applied for membership in NATO. The large-scale attack on February 2022, was a continuation of the crisis started by the Russian annexation of Crimea. These changes shocked surrounding areas, especially in the North. The Nordic countries of Sweden, Finland, and Norway are usually thought to be similar, which is true to an extent. However, they have very different historical backgrounds affecting their foreign and defense policy today.

This research focuses on the changed NATO perceptions of Sweden, Finland, and Norway. The main research question is "How has the perception towards NATO changed in the timeframe 2014–2022?". The timeframe for this research is derived from the Russian Annexation of Crimea which happened in 2014, and then the Russian large-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022. The theoretical framework comprises neoclassical realism which is supplemented with the balance of threat theory. Through neoclassical realism, I attempt to find out what factors and variables influenced the changes. This research utilizes both qualitative document analysis and content analysis. Document analysis method coding was utilized to create keywords. After the utilization of keywords, the data was then thematically categorized. Through the research data, I formulated five thematic categories.

The results showed changed perceptions towards NATO in all of the researched categories. To briefly present some of the results, in the category "Perceptions towards NATO Membership" the perceptions concerning NATO membership and anti-nuclear proliferation changed. In the earlier documents, Sweden describes the possible difficulty of being a NATO member and promoting anti-nuclear armament, but in 2022 it was no longer an issue for them. When the data was analyzed in relation to Norwegian membership perceptions, I noticed that Norway has taken an active approach to NATO development. Additionally, Norway started to emphasize NATO's approach to its core duties, as it shifted from overseas operations to the defense of its member states. Moreover, in the thematical category "Threat Perceptions" Swedish and Finnish governments were examining alternative security solutions (e.g. joint-EU units), but in 2022, both countries emphasized that there is no convincing alternative for NATO membership in terms of security guarantees. The factor affecting this is that most EU countries are already NATO members, and thus not likely to have an interest in building a similar overlapping organization. The research results give a better understanding of the researched states' NATO relations and its changes.

Keywords: NATO, Foreign policy, Security policy, International Relations, Sweden, Finland, Norway

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# TIIVISTELMÄ

Paavali Koivula: Muuttuneet NATO-käsitykset – Tutkimus Ruotsista, Suomesta ja Norjasta  
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Venäjän hyökkäys Ukrainaan muutti Euroopan turvallisuusympäristöä. Tämän muutoksen seurauksena Ruotsi ja Suomi, valtiot, jotka ovat olleet perinteisesti sotilaallisesti liittoutumattomia, ovat hakeutuneet Naton jäseniksi. Venäjän laajamittainen hyökkäys helmikuussa 2022 oli jatkumoa Ukrainan kriisille, joka alkoi Venäjän liittäessä Krimin niemimaan laittomasti itseensä. Nämä muutokset turvallisuusympäristössä tuntuivat erityisesti pohjoisessa. Pohjoismaita kuten Ruotsia, Suomea ja Norjaa pidetään usein hyvin samankaltaisina valtioina, mikä onkin osittain totta. Kuitenkin näillä valtioilla on hyvin erilaiset historialliset taustat, jotka tänä päivänä vaikuttavat niiden ulko- ja turvallisuuspolitiikkaansa.

Tutkimukseni käsittelee Ruotsin, Suomen ja Norjan muuttuneita NATO-käsityksiä. Tutkimuskysymys on aseteltu seuraavasti: ”Kuinka NATO-käsitykset ovat muuttuneet 2014–2022?”. Tutkimuksen ajallinen rajaus tulee Venäjän tekemästä krimin valtauksesta vuonna 2014 ja sekä Venäjän laajamittaisesta hyökkäyksestä Ukrainaan 2022. Teoreettinen viitekehys koostuu uusklassisesta realismista ja sitä täydennetään ”balance of threat theory”llä, eli vapaasti suomennettuna ”uhan tasapaino” teoriolla. Uusklassisen realismin kautta, yritän löytää mitkä tekijät ja muuttujat vaikuttivat muutoksiin. Tutkimus hyödyntää laadullista asiakirja-analyysiä sekä sisällönanalyysiä. Asiakirja-analyysi tutkimusmenetelmän avulla suoritettiin primääriaineiston koodauksen avainsanoja käyttämällä. Kun primääriaineisto oli käyty avainsanoja hyödyntämällä läpi, luotiin sisällönanalyysin keinoin viisi temaattista kategoriaa.

Tutkimuksen tulokset näyttävät NATO-käsitysten muuttuneen kaikissa tutkituissa kategorioissa. Lyhyitä havaintoja johtopäätelmistä: Kategoriassa ”Näkemykset NATO-jäsenyydestä” havainnointiin muutoksia suhtautumisessa NATO-jäsenyyteen sekä ydinaseiden leviämisen vastaisuuden näkemyksessä. Varhaisemmissa asiakirjoissa Ruotsi kuvailee vaikeuksia yhdistää NATO-jäsenyys sekä ydinasevastaisuus. Kuitenkin 2022, se ei ollut enää ongelma Ruotsille. Kun dataa analysoitiin Norjan NATO-jäsenyyden näkökulmasta, oli huomattavaa, että Norja oli ottanut aktiivisen toimintamallin NATOn kehitykseen. Lisäksi Norja oli ryhtynyt painottamaan NATOn ydintehävien muutosta ulkomaisista operaatioista jäsenmaidensa turvaamiseen. Temaattisessa kategoriassa ”Uhkakäsitykset” havainnointiin Ruotsin ja Suomen muuttuneista käsityksistä vaihtoehtoisten turvallisuusratkaisuiden suhteen (esim. laajemmat yhtenäiset EU-joukot), mutta vuonna 2022 molemmat valtiot painottivat, että NATO-jäsenyydelle ei ole uskottavaa korvaajaa turvallisuustakuiden suhteen. Tämän muutoksen vaikuttimena on se, että useat EU-maat ovat jo NATOn jäseniä, ja täten heillä ei ole mielenkiintoa rakentaa vastaavaa päällekkäistä organisaatiota. Tutkimustulokset auttavat ymmärtämään tutkittujen valtioiden NATO-suhteita ja niiden muutoksia.

Avainsanat: NATO, Ulkopolitiikka, Turvallisuuspolitiikka, Kansainväliset suhteet, Ruotsi, Suomi, Norja

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# **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 <i>Introduction and Background</i>	1
1.2 <i>Research Questions and Aim</i>	2
1.3 <i>Structure of the Study</i>	4
<b>2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 <i>Neoclassical Realism</i>	5
2.2 <i>Structure and Realism</i>	7
2.3 <i>Power in Realism</i>	9
2.4 <i>Different forms of Realism</i>	12
2.5 <i>Criticism of Neoclassical Realism</i>	14
2.6 <i>Balance of Power or Balance of Threat</i>	15
2.7 <i>Nordic Balance</i>	18
2.8 <i>Conceptualization of Foreign Policy Formulation</i>	19
2.9 <i>Perceptions</i>	20
2.10 <i>NATO in Literature</i>	23
<b>3. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>30</b>
3.1 <i>Document Analysis and Data Sample</i>	30
3.2 <i>Qualitative Content Analysis</i>	33
<b>4. ANALYSIS</b>	<b>37</b>
4.1 <i>Perceptions of the Changing Security Environment</i>	37
4.2 <i>Perceptions of the USA</i>	41
4.3 <i>Perception towards Co-operation</i>	47
4.4 <i>Perceptions towards NATO Membership</i>	53
4.5 <i>Threat Perceptions</i>	64
<b>5. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>72</b>
5.1 <i>Summary and Results</i>	72
<b>6. REFERENCES</b>	<b>76</b>

List of figures and tables

Table 1: Differences between forms of realism (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman 2009) p.6–7

Figure 1. Elaborating on the influences of neoclassical realism (Ripsman 2011) p.11

Figure 2. Exemplary model picturing the formation of the thematical categories p.36

## **Abbreviations**

BEAC = Barents Euro Arctic Council

EOP = NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Program

EU = European Union

FPO = Foreign Policy Executive

IR = International Relations

NATO = North-Atlantic Treaty Organization

NCR = Neoclassical Realism

NORDEFECO = Nordic Defense Cooperation

PII = Partnership Interoperability Initiative

US & USA = United States of America

UN = United Nations

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction and Background

Europe, and arguably the world faced a massive shift in the global security environment as Russia launched a large-scale attack on Ukraine on 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. The attack was a continuation of the Russian annexation of Crimea, which started in February 2014. The agenda of Russia, whether it is acting nationalistically or imperialistically has been debated (Rojek 2022 p. 459–460), but one thing remains clear, the security environment in Europe has changed. Russian attack on Ukraine has been argued to have been one of the single most shocking events after the Second World War (Brunk, & Hakimi 2022). This shock sends waves to surrounding areas, and the effects of this can be felt especially well nearby. In this instance, the effects are clearly felt in the Russian neighborhood and especially in Sweden and Finland as both are not NATO members, unlike the Baltic states which enjoy the security guarantees of NATO's 5<sup>th</sup> article.

Sweden, Finland, and Norway are all Nordic countries residing on the Western side of Russia. Nordic countries are often viewed as similar to each other (Lindskog & Stougaard-Nielsen 2020 p.209), which is true to an extent. It is largely accepted that Nordic countries have developed different social, cultural, and political solutions, which allow them to address social inequalities as well as environmental crises (ibid p.4). Despite their similarities, Sweden, Finland, and Norway have differences in their approach toward military alignment. Norway was one of the founding members of NATO in 1949 and has been a prominent member of the alliance ever since. Sweden has maintained its status of being militarily non-aligned and neutral for 200 years, which has resulted in non-alignment becoming highly rooted in their society (Cottey 2018 p. 73). Finland, on the other hand, was under Finlandization during the Cold War era and arguably after that as well (Arter 2022 p.6–8 & Boldyreva & Boldyrev 2018 p. 151–152). However, both Sweden and Finland were

improving their relations with NATO all along, despite them not being members. Moreover, the Swedish and Finnish foreign and security policies changed in 2022, as both countries applied for membership in NATO, which was a historical event for the two countries.

## **1.2 Research Questions and Aim**

This research analyses security politics of three Nordic states, Sweden, Finland, and Norway. As mentioned, these states have cultural, societal, and geographical similarities. Moreover, as Norway is already a NATO member, it brings an important insight into the changing perceptions that the Nordic states have, instead of having just Sweden and Finland under analysis. This research aims to understand what has changed in the Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian NATO perceptions, and what kind of reasons are there for these changes. Therefore, the research seeks to find out answers to these research questions:

Q1: How has the perception towards NATO changed in the timeframe 2014–2022?

Q2: What factors can explain the changes in perception?

To answer these questions, primary data consisting of official government documents was utilized. This research attempts to explain the recent changes in the Nordic security policy and to establish a framework elaborating on what resulted in Sweden and Finland applying for NATO. Moreover, there is a gap in the knowledge in the sense that this kind of research has not been done before with the same tools. The research is done using a theoretical framework consisting of neoclassical realism and the balance of threat theory. The timeframe from 2014 to 2022 comes from the two major changes in the European security sphere, the annexation of Crimea and the Russian large-scale attack on Ukraine. Despite the annexation and attack happening in February, the thesis includes the whole years of 2014

and 2022 in its grasp. This is due to the reason that the researched states had the time to create foreign policy documents in response to the large-scale war. Moreover, the reason why this research is about Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian NATO perceptions is linked to the events in Ukraine in two different timeframes, which comes from the established fact that both of these events shook the security environment, and as this research is concerned with NATO perceptions, it is convincing to suggest that these events impacted the set states' NATO perceptions. In this research, NATO perceptions are formulated in a way that they comprise how the researched states describe and discuss about NATO and NATO-related matters. According to Jervis, perceptions can be used to compare perceptions between different operating actors (2017 p.6–9). In this research, the operating actors are states, namely Sweden, Finland, and Norway. Moreover, states can be perceived to have perceptions, when they are condensed to being these operating actors, which perceive matters in the way that they publicly describe in their official government documents. This “reduced” approach to states gives the ability to analyze their perceptions. Perceptions in this research are not considered to be biological perceptions, but rather they are the way that states perceive and understand foreign policy and international relations.

This research is important as now during turbulent times in European security, it is necessary to understand why states act on their foreign policy as they do. After the large-scale attack on Ukraine, both Sweden and Finland pursued NATO membership in an arguably rapid manner. Yet, there is a lack of research on the NATO perceptions of Sweden, Finland, and Norway utilizing the set of research tools and methodology which this research utilizes. Moreover, Norway gets often dismissed in other scholarly work most likely due to it already being a member of NATO (Plevako 2022 & Lundqvist 2023). Therefore, I attempt to bring something new to the table of researching into the foreign and security policy of the aforementioned states concerning NATO.



### **1.3 Structure of the Study**

This research is built in the following way. After the introduction, comes the chapter “Theoretical Framework”. That chapter builds a foundation for the research, as it outlines neoclassical realism in a fundamental way, with comparison to its earlier iterations as well as its criticism. It then proceeds to elaborate on the additional component of the theoretical framework, the balance of threat theory. The chapter continues with a look into Nordic balance, which is followed by a conceptualization of foreign policy formulation, giving the research even more context. After that, there is a designated section for NATO literature regarding the researched states, which is followed lastly by establishing the use of perception in this research. The third chapter is called “Methodology”, and as the name suggests it outlines the methodological components of the research. The chapter is divided into two main categories according to the utilized methodologies, document analysis and qualitative content analysis. Chapter four is named “Analysis”. The analysis chapter is constructed in a way that establishes the significant changes and perceptions while simultaneously analyzing them. The chapter is divided into five sub-sections according to the thematic categories. At the end of the thematic categories, there is a concluding section that positions the analysis in the context of the theoretical framework. After the analysis comes the conclusion, which compiles and reflects the analyzed data and points out its relevance in the larger context. It is then followed by sub-sections “limitations and shortcomings” as well as “future research” suggestions. Lastly, there is an alphabetically comprised references section, outlining all of the material used in this research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter, I will elaborate on the theoretical framework used in this thesis. This thesis utilizes the foreign policy theory of neoclassical realism and supplements it with the balance of threat theory. The chapter is built in a way, where neoclassical realism is reflected in relation to its predecessors classical realism and neorealism. First, I will elaborate on the characteristics of neoclassical realism and its differences and similarities between its predecessors'. Then I will focus on explaining the balance of threat theory which is a supplementary theory to neoclassical realism. After that, I will shortly pay attention to the Nordic balance theory, which highlights the important similarities and differences between Nordic states. That is followed by sections concerning the conceptualization of foreign policy formulation and the role of perception in this research. Lastly, there is a subchapter focusing on NATO in the literature regarding the researched states.

### **2.1 Neoclassical Realism**

Neoclassical realism (also used as NCR) combines both main types of realism, classical realism and neorealism (the defensive aspect of neorealism), as the name quite clearly implies. It is a top-down, international system-based theory, which includes different internal variables (Narizny 2017 p. 155). When one goes back to the roots of neoclassical realism and the theory of realism in general, it is clear that it has taken time and authors to develop. The theory of realism in the context of international relations can be considered a theory that has gradually developed through several authors and their distinctive styles of analysis (Donnelly 2000 p. 6). Realism has arguably been part of international politics at least since the era of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides. However, it was linked to more general international relations studies when the field of study formed during, and after World

War I. Moreover, the contemporary umbrella concept of realism as people know it today was formed after the Second World War, by prominent researchers and scholars Hans Morgenthau and E. H. Carr.

I. Under this paragraph, there is a table describing fundamental differences and similarities in the three main forms of realism, namely classical realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism. This table describes clear distinctions about the specific nuances that are entailed in the different manifestations of the branches of realism. The table was created by Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman, and utilized in their research concerning neoclassical realism. The table has been formulated in a way, that it portrays epistemology and methodology, views of the international system, view of the units, dependent variables, and underlying causal logic.

Type of realism	Epistemology and methodology	View of the international system	View of the units	Dependent variable	Underlying causal logic
Classical Realism	Inductive theories; philosophical reflection on nature of politics or detailed historical analysis (generally drawn from West-European history)	Important to some extent	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Power distributions or distribution of interests (revisionist vs. status quo) → foreign policy
Neorealism	Deductive theories; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative and sometimes quantitative methods	Very important; inherently competitive and uncertain	Undifferentiated	International political outcomes	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → international outcomes (dependent variable)
Neoclassical realism	Deductive theorizing; competitive hypothesis testing using qualitative methods	Important; implications of anarchy are variable and sometimes untransparent to decision-makers	Differentiated	Foreign policies of states	Relative power distributions (independent variable) → domestic constraints and elite perceptions (intervening variables)

					→ foreign policy (dependent variable)
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Table 1 on the differences between realism, neorealism, and neoclassical realism (Taliaferro, Lobell & Ripsman 2009 p. 20)

The table above shows that neoclassical realism has several similarities between classical realism and neoclassical realism. For example, the view of the units is differentiated in classical realism and neoclassical realism, unlike in neorealism, where the view is undifferentiated. However, neorealism and neoclassical realism are similar in their epistemology and methodology as well as their approach to relative power distribution in underlying causal logic. Both are deductive theories, with competitive hypothesis testing. Moreover, it is possible to see from the table that neoclassical realism adopts intervening variables that influence the state’s foreign policy decision-making. Intervening variables include for example the perceptions of leaders and the structure of the state and its limits (Dawood 2016 & Beqa 2019 p. 324).

## 2.2 Structure and Realism

Neoclassical realism pays attention to several layers of structure through its different variables, which is why it is vital to understand the roots of its relation to structure. When neoclassical realism is compared to neorealism (also known as structural realism), as the other name proposes, neorealism is highly focused on the structural concepts of nations. This perception is different from the one proposed by neoclassical realism. According to Waltz, a structure can be defined by the particular arrangement of its parts, and true structural changes are the changes of arrangements in the structure (Waltz 1979 p. 80). What this means in practice, is that political institutions themselves do not make a structure, but it is the arrangement of the political institutions that make the structure. Moreover, Waltz argues that systems of domestic politics are highly hierarchic and centralized, whilst the

systems of international politics are anarchic and decentralized, essentially building on the notion established by classical realism, that the international system is anarchic (ibid p. 88). Neorealism emphasizes the structure (and the arrangement) as the key reason behind the actions of states. When neorealists try to define the international-political structure, they have certain measures to do so. These measures include the notion that neorealists decisively dismiss everything “extra” around the structure, such as desires, traditions, feelings, and even the fundamental questions of whether they are authoritarian, democratic, and so on (ibid p.99). In a metaphorical sense, neorealists do not only try to see through “clothes” but also the skin and flesh, to see the bones and how they are arranged in the body, as that is the main factor that keeps the body moving.

To understand more about neoclassical realism and its early stages, it is helpful to look at how the variables became a feature in it, and how they bring structure to the theory. There have been several scholars who have emphasized the combination of systemic-level variables and unit-level variables, such as Wohlforth (1993 p. 100–106). However, when one takes a look at a scholar who arguably had the most impact on the creation/advancement of neoclassical realism, they will see the name Gideon Rose. Neoclassical realism was significantly advanced by Gideon Rose, in his 1998 article “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy”. In the article, Rose criticizes the “bare-bones” aspect of neorealism, which does not pay much interest to the daily aspects and mundane matters concerning international relations and global politics (Rose 1998 p. 145). Instead, Gideon Rose proposes neoclassical realism as a theoretical framework that combines both internal and external variables. However, Gideon Rose (1998) elaborates on how there is no clear definitive connection between the material capabilities of a state and its behavior in the context of foreign policy. Rose highlights that choices made concerning foreign policy are actually made by different political leaders and elites. Nonetheless, the political leaders and the elites might not have the capability to extract and use the state’s resources as they please, which emphasizes the importance of

political structure in the mix. Thirdly, Rose adds systemic pressure, which can shape and guide the overall direction of foreign policy, even though it might not be as strong to control the foreign policy direction by itself (ibid p. 146–147). Essentially, it is the mix of these components which builds the backbone of neoclassical realism. It is highlighted that by understanding the relations of these components, and their influence on each other, then you can understand foreign policies.

## 2.3 Power in Realism

Neoclassical realists argue that both the ambition and the scope of any states foreign policy are mainly driven by its relative position in the international system as well as its relative capabilities concerning material power (Rose 1998 p. 146). The importance of material power capabilities is highlighted in the text through Thucydides' formula, which goes like: *The strong states can do what they want, while the weaker states suffer what they must* (ibid p.146). This emphasis on power is a great example of the strong unhinged view that is embedded in the heart of the theory of realism. As it is compared to other forms of realism, one can see that the main forms of realism are similar in their view of the international system as realists in general view the international system as unregulated and anarchic in nature. This means that there are no set rules that every actor abides by. Moreover, realists argue that the need for policies comes from competition between states, and the success of these policies can be measured through preserving and upholding the state as well as making the state stronger (Donnelly 2000 p. 7). According to Hans Morgenthau, a prominent scholar of realism, *power* is something that can be seen as an objective category, which is valid across the globe. However, it does not mean that power is the same for everybody, essentially elaborating that it can mean different things for different states. The concept of power for a state is determined by two key components, the cultural environment as well as the political environment (Morgenthau & et al, 2006 p. 12–13). It is quite clear that power for Finland, a small state, can be wholly different thing compared to power for

the United States, a hegemonical superpower. But none the less, power stays in the close center of political focus on the international landscape. In the classic book, *Politics among Nations: the struggle for Power and Peace*, Morgenthau has a very relevant notion concerning the realist approach to decision-making when *power* and *legality* are juxtaposed. In 1939 when the Soviet Union attacked Finland, France, and Great Britain were faced with a difficult decision due to the illegal attack, which broke the covenant of the League of Nations. From a legality aspect, the answer was clear, condemn the attack and begin countermeasures. However, the potential countermeasures were stopped by Sweden, as it did not allow troops to travel through its territory to defend Finland, which meant that France and Great Britain were saved from having their troops in the war against the Soviet Union. On a longer periodical scale, France and Great Britain could have ended up battling on two fronts with both the Soviet Union and Germany, rather than just Germany. Morgenthau underlines the importance of the question of power, power in the context of realism. As it was mentioned before, power can be measured by preserving the nation (survival of the state) and by how strong it is, it could have been a catastrophically bad decision for them to attack the Soviet Union in the realist context (ibid p. 15–17). This shows how decision-making through the lenses of realism can be a complex and varied process.

Additionally, it is important to notice, that through the lenses of neoclassical realism, state leaders can maneuver the international environment based on their domestic policies, or they can maneuver the domestic policies based on foreign reasons (Lobell & et al 2009 p. 43–44). I find this notion very relevant to the question of NATO perspectives, as for example Sauli Niinistö, the president of Finland, has had quite a positive attitude towards NATO membership in the past, but when he was elected as the president of Finland, he became much quieter on the topic, as Finnish citizens did not have strong support for NATO membership at that time. Moreover, international security scholar Tomas Ries even argued that President Niinistö might have received a strong message from Putin,

that NATO membership is not an option for Finland (Hautanen 2021). If Niinistö did not receive strong influence from Putin, the change in his NATO attitudes could have also been due to domestic reasons, as in 2012 when Sauli Niinistö was elected as the president of Finland, the NATO membership support in Finland was at its lowest at just 14%, with only 4% of the people giving strong support (Metelinen 2021). This type of data is very useful when analyzing foreign policy actions in the light of neoclassical realism, as systemic pressures impact foreign policy decisions. As I have already discussed about the variables and factors influencing each other, I present Figure 1, depicting influences regarding neoclassical realism. This figure attempts to help in making sense of the influencing factors.

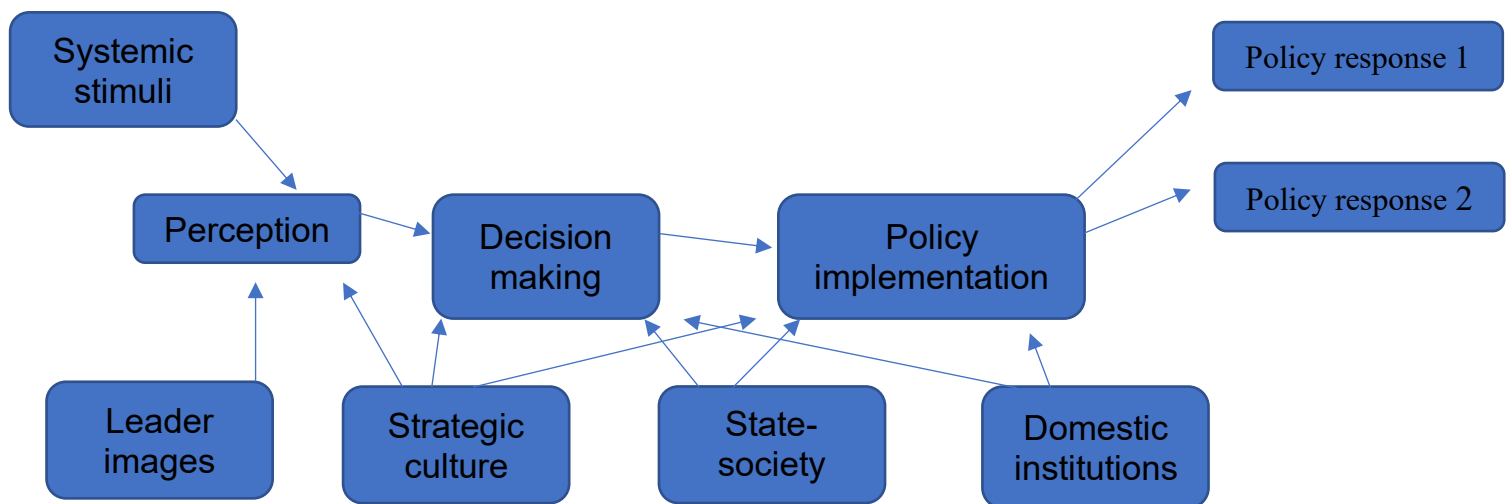


Figure 1. Elaborating on the influences of neoclassical realism (Ripsman 2011 p. 9)

The figure above is based on an article from a prominent neoclassical realist Norrin Ripsman. Ripsman has used this figure in at least two studies (2011 p. 9 & 2016 p. 59), where this figure works as a tool to elaborate on the influences that the different variables have on each other. From this figure, I want to highlight the intervening variable, *leader images*. Ripsman explains that especially during situations, which are considered a crisis, leader perceptions have a great influence on foreign policy



decisions in the short run (Ripsman & et al. 2016 p. 61). These leader perceptions and images includes the perception of people who have a monopoly on relevant knowledge, such as prime ministers, presidents, ministers, and even advisors and so on. These people are called FPEs or foreign policy executives. The FPEs can be considered to have influence and *power*, which relates directly to power usage in the context of international relations. According to the variables of neoclassical realism, it is possible to say that the perceptions that foreign policy executives have on political matters impact foreign policy formulation directly. This point is especially important for this research, as it is possible to say that the large-scale attack on Ukraine launched a crisis in the whole of Europe, which then allowed foreign policy executives to act out their foreign policy. On the other hand, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions are considered to be influential in both short-to-medium and medium-to-long-term foreign policy (ibid p. 61). In this research, I attempt to operationalize this view of NCR to the changed NATO perception in relation to the aforementioned variables. This means that I attempt to find out what factors influenced the changes in NATO perceptions.

## **2.4 Different forms of Realism**

Neoclassical realism can be used in a variety of ways. Its predecessor neorealism, by contrast, had clear sub-categories. In this chapter, I focus on the categorization of these two theories. First, it is beneficial to understand how the predecessor of neoclassical realism, neorealism has clearly defined sub-categories. The sub-categories of neorealism can be utilized by their characteristics. However, in neoclassical realism, the lack of clear-cut categories gives certain freedoms on how one can interpret it.

Neorealism can be divided into two sub-categories (competing assumptions) known as defensive realism and offensive realism. These sub-categories were also developed by Kenneth Waltz and elaborated in the book *Theory of International Politics*, published in 1979. It is important to understand the differences between these sub-categories, as it is defensive realism that works as a fundamental element in neoclassical realism. Defensive realism highlights states' need to enforce moderate and "secure" policies, in order to ensure their survival in the anarchic system. It argued that defensive realists can set a limit to their pursuit of power, due to maximization of security, which leads to survival and is thus a goal (Paul & et al, 2004 p. 32). Defensive realists accept that the survival of a state can be achieved by mostly defensive security strategies. Only if a state has assured its survival in the system, they can proceed to fulfill other goals, for example. power and profit. Moreover, it highlights the need for survival not through maximization of one's power, but instead maintaining one's position in the larger system (Waltz 1979 p. 126). Offensive realism underlines that security, thus survival, can be achieved through hegemonial position in the system and domination over others. Unlike the principles of defensive realism, offensive realism underlines the notion, that states cannot be sure about the intentions of other states, which raises the term "security dilemma" to the table. Waltz credits John Herz for coining the term and continues to elaborate on how the security dilemma sets motion to a vicious circle of uncertainty. However, the uncertainty can be balanced with certain weaponry of great powers, nuclear weapons. According to Waltz, nuclear weapons do not only deter other nuclear weapons, but they also work as conflict de-escalators, as one does not want to step over the limit of nuclear arms usage (ibid p. 186–188). In addition, previously realist theories had tried to understand the so-called "international reality" on the basis of conflictual state relations and power, but now neoclassical realism aims to uncover different state's foreign policy by including domestic/national and international levels (Dawood 2016). Through the inclusion of domestic and international levels, the proponents of neoclassical realism argue that they can explain

and predict foreign policy behavior better than before, and thus steer clear from the previous mistakes in this context.

As I elaborated previously, neoclassical realism does not come with similar sub-categories. That is why, it is vital to explain how I establish the use of neoclassical realism in this research. The specific way that I attempt to utilize neoclassical realism in this thesis is to utilize previous “Figure 1”, created by Rispman, in order to see what factors influence what and thus understand how the perceptions have changed and what has influenced the change. Obviously, one can say that Finland and Sweden have now applied for NATO membership, but more than that, it is important to understand what kind of factors influenced the change in the perception to do so. Already, in the fall of 2021, the support for NATO membership in Finland was on the rise; being 26 % support for the membership (Metelinen 2021), while in January 2022 Sweden had 37% support for the membership (Statista 2022). Through neoclassical realism, it is possible to analyze the different variables and factors that impacted the change. As elaborated, neoclassical realism pays attention to the independent, dependent, and intervening variables and their relation in foreign policy formation. In this research, I applied this theory to the larger analysis of the primary data, which consisted of government documents and publications. I analyzed the data in a way, that I attempted to underpin the changes regarding the states’ NATO perceptions. Moreover, I attempted to explain the changes by the influences of variables, which are outlined in Figure 1.

## **2.5 Criticism of Neoclassical Realism**

The theory of neoclassical realism is not in any way perfect. Narizny (2017) criticized neoclassical realism and argued that the theory itself is flawed. Narizny argued that the theory leaves too much ambiguity in its boundaries. For example, realism takes some domestic factors into account, but the

used domestic factors are clearly bounded by the core assumptions. Gideon Rose does not elaborate on specific domestic policies which influence foreign policy actions but instead leaves the question open. Moreover, Narizny argues that neoclassical realism exceeds boundaries and therefore it leads to error (Narizny 2017 p. 156). When I reflect this on the research at hand, it is pivotal to thoroughly limit the boundaries, to avoid ending up in errors described by Narizny. Narizny is not the only one criticizing neoclassical realisms' ambiguity, as several other scholars write about the same thing. Neoclassical realism is said to cause disappointment to scholars looking for clear and concise boundaries and analytical certainty (Meibauer & et al. 2021 p. 290). Some scholars have argued that neoclassical realism is meant for analyzing discrepancies and unexpected events from neorealist expectations, but others have underlined its broader applicability in research (Lobell 2009 p. 281). Essentially, this means that neoclassical realism can be utilized in a wide variety of ways, which are not necessarily consistent with one another. From a theoretical point of view, this creates ambiguity, but it can also create freedom for the researcher to use the theory in the way that best suits the set research questions. Depending on one's scholarly taste, one can find the lack of clear-cut boundaries in neoclassical realism either disappointing or promising.

## **2.6 Balance of Power or Balance of Threat**

The concept of balance of power has been utilized together with different forms of realism by several scholars (Lobell & et al 2009, Steinsson 2017 & Smith 2017). The balance of power theory consists of the idea that states form alliances with each other to prevent another powerful state from reaching hegemony (Walt 1985 p. 5). If I would put this into a more understandable context, I could paint a picture that the world would consist of only Nordic states. If Norway would get too powerful, it is logical through the balance of power theory that Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland would work together and form alliances, so that Norway would not become relatively too powerful. The hegemony for one state is perceived as a negative thing, because a state in that position, can do as

they please. Moreover, a multistate system is seen as the preferred way. Balance of power theorists applies the goal which I have outlined from realism, which is that the main aim of any state is its survival (Paul & et al. 2004 p. 32). Hegemonies are a concrete threat to a survival of a state, as they can have the ultimate power over other states. However, it needs to be understood that the concept and the meaning of hegemony have been contested previously (Thomas 2021 p. 318–320). That being underlined, I will not go in-depth in analyzing hegemony as a concept, but rather take the common understanding of it. In this context, the Balance of power theory suggests several paths, to why hegemony is prevented in the system. Firstly, potential hegemonies know that if they attempt to reach hegemony, it will create a backlash and opposing military coalitions would be formed and that is why states abstain from attempting to reach it. Secondly, if potential hegemonies start to aggressively arm themselves, it will create aligning opposing forces. The opposing force then continues to send a signal to the hegemony through confrontation or with larger arming, that its aims are pointless, and the potential hegemony stops its attempts. Lastly, if hegemony has begun expansionist attempts, the opposing alliance defeats the attempting hegemony in traditional war (Paul 2004 p. 36).

Balancing and bandwagoning are two key concepts relating to the balance of power theory. Balancing aspects is one where the states balance against the stronger power to equalize the relative power. Balancing states believe that when the threat of a stronger state is mitigated, the alliances founded during wartime become unnecessary and thus will lead to the end of the alliances. Bandwagoning on the other hand is the opposite of balancing, which means that states faced with stronger external threats will align with the stronger power. Weaker states conducting bandwagoning will make their policies align with the stronger state in order to seem more friendly and thus try to mitigate the chance of being overrun by the stronger state. Bandwagoners believe that the formed alliances against the stronger states will cease to exist when the stronger state becomes seriously threatening (Walt 1987 p. 32–33).

The balance of threat theory has been developed from the balance of power theory. It was first proposed by Stephen M. Walt in his 1985 article called “Alliance Formation and the Balance of Power”. The theory was formed during a time when alliance formation was at the center of interest for American foreign policy. It was the time of the Cold war, and American scholars wanted to understand the mechanisms behind states’ alignment (Walt 1985 p. 3). Balance of threat theory elaborates on four different categories, that the states use when they are evaluating the possible threat posed by another state. The four categories are aggregate power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions (ibid p.9). The first category aggregate power includes the geographical size of a state, its population, and its economic strength. The proximity aspect is focused on the geographical proximity of the weaker and stronger state. The offensive capabilities include the size and quality of their armed forces, and the offensive intentions consist of the perceived intentions of the set state (ibid p.9–12, Person 2017 p.45). Balance of threat theory advanced balance of power theory by applying threats to the mix, instead of focusing purely on offensive capabilities (Bock & Henneberg 2013 p. 3). This is important in the balance of threat theory, as Walt elaborates on how states which are perceived as aggressive, tend to instigate alliance formation as a balancing tool against them. Additionally, Walt explains how perceptions play an important role in alliance formation, more so than the actual military power of another state (Walt, 1987 p.25–26). Moreover, the balance of threat theory has a linkage to the defensive realism, an iteration of neorealism, and as it has been mentioned, defensive realism is one part of neoclassical realism. The linkage between the balance of threat and defensive realism is crystalized in the notion that states do not attempt to maximize their power per se but instead states attempt to maximize and ensure their security (Person 2017 p, 45). I attempt to utilize the balance of threat theory, especially by paying attention to the categories it proposed. The analysis with the four categories of the balance of threat is in the “threat perception” thematical category in the analysis section.

## 2.7 Nordic Balance

After the balance of threat theory, it is beneficial for the research to understand different security policy concepts, regarding the geographical area. It is beneficial in the sense that it provides alternative perspective to the theoretical framework and additionally portrays how different theories were critically contested for this thesis. Nordic balance theory is an older theory in the field of foreign and security policy. It emphasizes the formulation of security policies in the Nordics, and the theory itself arose during the earlier Cold War period. The Nordic balance theory is concerned with the peculiar way that the Nordic countries were aligned and what kind of alliances they had during that time. Norway, Denmark, and Iceland were all members of NATO, while Sweden was proud of its non-alignment and Finland had a special relationship with the Soviet Union (Haugevik & Sending 2020 p. 112 and Strang, Marjanen, & Hilson 2021 p. 30). The relationship between Finland and Soviet Union was indeed special, especially when it is analyzed now during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, several scholars argued that the special unity, but also the differences that the Nordic countries had, created a situation where great power tensions were actually decreased in the whole region altogether (Haugevik & Sending 2020 p. 112). The Nordic peace connotation was used in 1963 by Finland, as Finland initiated a “Nordic nuclear-weapon-free zone”. The initiative was not successful as NATO members Norway, Denmark, and Iceland were against it (Strang, Marjanen, & Hilson, 2021 p. 30). The fundamental building blocks of Nordic balance changed when Cold War ended and as both Sweden and Finland joined the European Union. The different approaches of Nordic countries to broader integration into Europe have been studied extensively, and arguments have been made that Finland and Sweden have adopted this “German-style” of integration, which entails a multilateralist vision of European integration, including supranational ambitions and strong united European security. On the other hand, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway have been argued to adopt a “British-style” approach to integration, which entails an intergovernmentalist vision, meaning that it includes

a strong preference towards having national autonomy as well as Atlanticist security plans (Haugevik & Sending 2020 p. 112).

Even though there are cultural similarities between the Nordic countries, it has been shown that their foreign policy decision-making does not necessarily arise from the sense of “being Nordic” but instead plainly from their interests and needs. There are areas where some of the Nordic countries have more in common and/or joint projects in. A good example of this could be the joint efforts of Sweden, Finland, and Norway in defense and security-related matters in recent years (Ministry of Defence of Sweden 2020 p.8). This just shows that the Nordic countries are very different when compared to each other, even though they have a lot of similarities. The similarities are highlighted in the appreciation of rule of law, social democracy, and welfare.

Haugevik and Sending argue that Nordic countries have independently been fixed with their foreign policy approach and maintain their own positions in it (2020 p.110). In relation to neoclassical realism, one can see that from influencing variables, the strategic culture and domestic institutions influence the aspect in which they conduct their foreign policy. Strategic culture in the sense, that Sweden has been neutral for so long, and thus trying to attempt to maintain that position. Finland in the sense, that if one works with the West, it is not beneficial to ruin relations with the East, and in this case, it is essentially meaning Russia. It can be said that Nordic culture theory has relevance when analyzing through the lenses of neoclassical realism, but as for strategic culture, it does seem like the culture comes from the individual state, rather than the larger Nordic area.

## **2.8 Conceptualization of Foreign Policy Formulation**



In terms of the formulation of foreign policy, there is a minute but important differences between Sweden, Norway, and Finland. These differences can be seen in the bodies that influence foreign policy decision-making. When it comes to foreign policy executives, it is important to understand where the differences lay in this matter. From the point of neoclassical realism as leaders perceptions have impact in foreign-policy formulation (Ripsman 2011 p.9), it is relevant to understand who the leaders are given that the focus of the research is on Sweden, Finland, and Norway. Sweden has its government and parliament, Riksdag. Similarly, Norway has its government and parliament, Storting. When it is time to analyze the Finnish foreign policy decision-making that one can see a difference. Finland has its government and parliament, Eduskunta. However, in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter §93 of the Finnish constitution, it is described how Finnish foreign and security matters are led by the President of Finland together with the government of Finland. This means that the President of Finland has actual impact and influence over foreign policy matters. This influence causes slight confusion, as some scholars describe Finland as being purely parliamentary, despite it clearly having characteristics of a semi-presidential system. In practice, this can be seen in the president of Finland taking part in high-level political meetings with for example. prime ministers of Sweden and Norway. This does not undermine the legitimacy of the Finnish prime minister, but instead, they work in these matters closely together with the president, unlike Norway and Sweden where the prime minister has a bigger responsibility.

## 2.9 Perceptions

Perceptions play an important role in the fundamental structure of this research, as it is focused on the changes happening in perceptions. Moreover, elaborating on the specific meaning behind the word *perceptions* is vital for this research, as this research focuses on the perceptions of Sweden, Finland, and Norway. The word *perception*, itself has several definitions depending on the context and the

field of study it is used in. Perceptions are described in a way of thinking about something as well as one's idea of what something is like (Qiong 2017 p. 18). In the context of international relations and political science, Robert Jervis has studied perception and misperception in the context of international relations. Jervis's studies have focused on individual perspectives but also on different actors' perspectives as he writes:

We can also compare different actors' perceptions of the same object, situation, or other actor. If we can find appropriate comparisons, we can try to locate systematic differences in perceptions traceable to differences in ways of processing incoming information, differences in preexisting images of others or general views of the world, or differences in specific experiences. I have found this approach very valuable, especially when seeking to explain the determinants of a person's perceptual predisposition (Jervis 2017 p. 7).

Even though Jervis has extensively used this in studies of people's perceptions, he acknowledges that it can be also used as a tool to compare perceptions between different operating actors. This elaboration works as a foundation for the study of perceptions, as many scholars who study perception focus only on individuals and groups of people, not necessarily state actors. Through this method of understanding perception, it is possible to compare the set state – namely Swedish Finnish, and Norwegian – perceptions towards NATO and see what has changed in the perception. This means that in the context of this research, perceptions are not considered to be biological stimulus, rather it is the way that the states see and understand international relations and foreign policy. The way that states see and understand these matters influence their actions, and that is where the focus of the research is pinpointed. To elaborate this further, if Sweden describes its US relations in the earlier government documents in a way that is different from the later documents, one can say that the

perception of that matter has changed. Moreover, if Norwegian government elaborates on increasing co-operation in an earlier document, and in the later documents describe even deeper co-operation, one can say that the perception has changed. The perception has changed in a way that for one reason or another, Norway perceives needing deeper co-operation. Besides the aforementioned descriptions of perception, in this research, I include among perceptions how the researched state actors describe their foreign policy actions. To elaborate this further, if Finland decides to emphasize the open door policy with NATO in their official government documents, it portrays Finland's perception of the global security situation. In that instance, Finland seems to consider the security environment in a light that there is no need to apply for a NATO membership. Additionally, as I have previously clarified, leadership perceptions are an intrinsic part of neoclassical realism. Leadership perceptions come as a very natural part of decision-making and operating methods, and they are very significant in foreign policy decision-making (Ripsman & et al 2016 p. 61). The perceptions elaborated by neoclassical realism link comfortably to the balance of threat theory, as threat perceptions are a key component in it (ibid p. 144). Decision-making in foreign policy and especially security policies are linked with perceived threats, so the combination of these two theories through the perception aspect comes naturally. Moreover, this convincingly opens up a possibility to utilize speeches and comments made by FPOs as relevant data to understand the changes in perception by the set countries. However, due to the limitations set by the length of a master's thesis, it is not possible to include a larger number of speeches. Moreover, it is important to clarify the actors of the perception. Despite the analyzed government document being published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Defense, they are considered to represent the perception of the state that they originate from. Thus, the research utilizes for example both forms of describing a state actor's actions and perception "According to Finland.." and "Finnish government suggests..". This is done because it is assumed that the government bodies are representing the "whole" in the documents and because it gives clarity and structure to the research.

As mentioned before, the concept of perception has a wide variety of definitions, which are being used in many different ways in research. This paragraph briefly discusses alternative perception concepts. When it comes to the field of international relations and politics, it is worthwhile to elaborate on some of the other prominent perception models. The approach of *Machtpolitik* entails that in international relations, power is the core element in shaping threat, thus making power a more significant driver concerning foreign policy formulation, compared to the threat. Continuing this, several works of literature in international relations and psychology suggest that the perceptions that people have on threat and potential intentions actually come before the perceptions that people have on power, which makes threat and potential intentions more prominent compared to power (Gries 2022 p. 289–290). It is good to have knowledge concerning different methods of utilizing perception and power in research, as different approaches have their benefits. However, this way of utilizing perception does not benefit this research regarding answering the set research questions.

## 2.10 NATO in Literature

This path to NATO application has been recently studied from the perspective of Finlandisation by David Arter in his article “From Finlandisation and post- Finlandisation to the end of Finlandisation? Finland's road to a NATO application”. In his article, Arter argues that even after the Cold War, Finland still showed signs of post-Finlandisation, which was evident in its attempt not to publicly criticize Russia or its actions too much (Arter 2022 p.6–8). Finland additionally, looked for defense protection from European Union membership, but that was deemed to be ineffective, as most influential EU member states were already part of NATO. It was only during this year, that a radical shift in NATO attitudes within political parties rose, as suddenly most of the political parties supported NATO membership. The author elaborates, that this happened at the same while the public

opinion towards NATO changed as well, as the polls were becoming increasingly more favorable towards NATO membership. Finally, when Finland started to prepare for the NATO application, they wanted to do it together with Sweden, to some extent as the two countries did with the EU application. However, this time it was Finland that was more active and hastier in the application procedure, and to some extent took the leading role in it (ibid p. 15–17). Despite Finland being seemingly non-aligned after the Second World War, there are scholars who argue that Finland has not been non-aligned nor neutral in its foreign and security policy. Finnish foreign policy has been researched through the lens of Europeanization, and the research stated that even before the annexation of Crimea, Finland has sought to develop a common defense and security policy with its Western allies (Palosaari 2013 p. 19). The research also argues that Finland has given up on its small state identity and changed it to a small member state identity partially because of the adaptive pressure exerted by the European Union towards Finland (ibid p. 28). Tuomas Forsberg has researched Finland's NATO relations and non-alignment and argues that Finland's non-alignment policy is historically much shorter than the non-alignment policy of Sweden (Forsberg 2017 p. 5). Moreover, Forsberg argues that many Finns believe that the path of neutrality was successful in the Cold War era (ibid p.5). After the Cold War ended, Finland's plans to join the EU were first and foremost impacted by Sweden, as Sweden announced its plans of joining the EU. Still, at this stage, NATO membership was only considered to be a theoretical option, despite Finland's plans to start deepening its cooperation with NATO (ibid p.5–6). It was in the mid-1990's when Finland decided to publicly discuss having "a NATO option", which meant that they would not seek full membership, but have that as a possibility, a sort of security tool if things changed. However, still Finland claimed that they would not be looking for new defense solutions (ibid p. 6). The fundamental reason behind NATO discussions in the first place is the point that Finland is too small to protect itself, in the case of a Russian invasion. Both Sweden and the EU as a provider of military assistance is not seen as a convincing choice (ibid p. 13). NATO discussions in Finland are interesting, in the sense that they provide knowledge on what is being discussed and

where, and who are thought to be credible sources on NATO matters. There is a recent study by Reijo Savolainen, which analyses the credibility aspect of NATO discussions, and the results indicate that the President of Finland, Sauli Niinistö, is thought to be a very credible source when it comes to NATO-related matters (Savolainen 2022 p. 11). Already in 2018, former chairman of the National Coalition party Alexander Stubb emphasized that if Sauli Niinistö would publicly announce his support towards NATO membership, it would change the perceptions of the Finnish citizens to a more favorable towards Finnish membership (Hyytinen 2022). Moreover, according to the study by Savolainen, the President has recent and relevant information concerning the membership, which in turn impacts his credibility in a positive manner. As President Niinistö has influence in the foreign and security policy formulation, it seems that it increases his relative credibility. However, it has to be noted, that President Niinistö enjoys very significant trust from the people of Finland, as his popularity ratings have been in polls made in 2022 a whopping 91-92% (Aaltola 2022). However, it is interesting to note that President Niinistö's NATO opinions have fluctuated in the past throughout his political career, which in some sense can be argued to have been used as a political tool depending on the elections, he or his party, the Finnish National Coalition party, participated in (Hyytinen 2022). As the President of Finland is partaking in foreign and security policy formulation, it has been clear that the presidents in the past have had different perceptions when it comes to NATO membership. As President Niinistö's perception has been outlined, it must be mentioned that President Martti Ahtisaari (1994–2000) was favorable towards NATO membership, while his successor President Tarja Halonen (2000–2012) was not, as she deemed herself as a protector of Finland's military non-alignment status (Forsberg 2017 p. 11).

Sweden has been known for its non-alignment stance on the international sphere. Sweden has witnessed more than 200 years of peace, despite having wars in its close proximity, which is a significant achievement in Europe (Cottey 2018 p. 73). Since the end of the Cold war, Sweden has

turned into a significant NATO partner, and it has even been informally named “partner number one” by Brussels NATO HQ (ibid p. 74). However, Cottey argues that Sweden is not likely to become a NATO member in short-term and even long-term predictions, due to idealist and realist reasons (ibid p. 75). The idealist and realist reasons include the Swedish people’s skepticism towards military alliances and the idealistic view of neutrality. The fact that Sweden is now waiting for its membership to be ratified by all NATO countries portrays the fundamental shift which has taken place since the start of the large-scale war in Ukraine. Sweden’s foreign policy has been studied with the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism by Anna Wieslander. In her research “The Hultqvist Doctrine – Swedish Security and defense policy after the Russian annexation of Crimea” Wieslander explains how Sweden has increased its cooperation with different states and international organizations in order to secure its defenses. The paper highlights how Sweden has resisted NATO membership, as it values its non-alignment policy to a high degree (Wieslander 2021 p. 37). Moreover, Wieslander argues that one of the reasons why Sweden hasn’t sought NATO membership has been due to the domestic politics, as the ruling Swedish Social Democratic Party has *pacifist, anti-American, and anti-nuclear* factions in the party, so openly supporting NATO would have created a wave of internal conflicts. Despite the Russian annexation of Crimea, these factions haven’t changed their minds about militarily aligning with the Americans and NATO. Another reason why Sweden hasn’t joined NATO according to Wieslander is due to public opinion. Even though some polls have been quite close to 50% at times, the majority of Swedish people have not wanted Sweden to join the organization, until now in 2022 (ibid p. 50). This research was conducted by utilizing neoclassical realism, as it is especially evident in the aforementioned change in the state–society relations in the public opinion of NATO. Neoclassical realism explains deviations from the usual operating method, in this case, the non-alignment policy:

“Such deviations can be expected under domestic conditions that hinders policy flexibility, such as shifting from a long tradition of neutrality and military nonalignment, to formally joining an alliance” (ibid p. 52).

Swedish NATO debate has been studied previously by Simons, Manoylo, and Trunov in 2019, where they found similar results, as their research indicates that the NATO debate is split into two sections. First of all, there are the traditionalists, who support the longstanding non-alignment policy for Sweden, and thus want Sweden to stay militarily non-aligned. On the other hand, there are the NATO membership supporters, who categorize Russia as a potential threat and a force that creates a situation where Sweden is more secure as a member of NATO (Simons, Manoylo, & Trunov 2019 p. 343). Additionally, it was significant to understand, that the NATO supporters, who perceive Russia as a threat, also support a rapid joining in NATO. In the research, they do not emphasize the annexation of Crimea in 2014, they rather highlight the potential submarine sightings in the Baltic Sea (ibid p.343). Either way, now that Sweden has applied for NATO membership, one can see that the rapid membership process is again significant for the Swedish NATO supporters, even though the reason for joining is more than a mere potential submarine sighting.

If Sweden has been proud of its neutrality and non-alignment, Norway has been promoting its peaceful attitude towards foreign policy and its so-called “foreign policy of peace” (Leira 2013 p. 338). The idea that Norway is a peaceful nation started already in late the 1800s, and by the early 1900s Norway decided to take a more active role in peace promotion (ibid p. 338). The article by Leira “Our Entire People are Natural Born Friends of Peace” argues that personal benefits, such as status-seeking and maximization of interests must be always secondary effects of peace promotion, and that peace itself is an intrinsic value for Norway (ibid p. 353). The idea of Norway’s “foreign policy of peace” has also received criticism, pointing out Norway’s participation in foreign wars and



exportation of military armament (ibid p. 350–351). Nonetheless, Norway is a proud promoter of peace and also a proud member of NATO, two things which are not excluding each other. Research by Græger on Norway's foreign and security policy focusing on its relationships with Nordic countries, NATO, and EU underlined differences in the strategic importance of these relations. First of all, unlike Finland and Sweden, Norway is not a member of the European Union, however, it is a part of the European economic area. Secondly, it is part of NATO and has been since its formulation in 1949. These two major factors impact Norway's foreign and security policy and differentiate it from Finland and Sweden. In the article, the author describes how Norway is an active member in NORDEFCO (Nordic Defense Cooperation) and other joint programmes, but at the same time, the Nordic cooperation influences Norway's actual security and defense policies on a much smaller level. Moreover, the author argues that Norway's security and defense strategies lay with NATO, despite during the Donald Trump administration, there were critical comments by Norwegian politicians about NATO and Norway's role in it (Græger 2018 p. 6). In the overall sphere of foreign policy, Nordic cooperation has started to gain more importance. The importance of Nordic cooperation has partially risen due to Finland and Sweden becoming closer with NATO in recent years, but it is yet unknown whether this will have a growing influence on actual Norway's foreign policy (ibid p. 9–10). The history of Norway plays a large part in the formulation of its foreign- and defense policy, as much like Finland, Norway got its independence much later compared to Sweden, in 1905. Norway declared itself neutral during World War I and managed to upkeep its neutrality. It was during World War II when Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany, that ignited a change in Norway's foreign and security policy, which then led to the aforementioned NATO membership (Wesley 2017 p. 93–94). It is a question worth pondering, whether Norway would have kept the Swedish way of military non-alignment, without the tragic events and occupation during the Second World War. However, Norway stayed as a loyal member of NATO during the Cold War era, and even after it when the global security environment changed due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Norway made changes to its armed

forces but kept a close connection with NATO and the United States, and thus ensured a strong and secure North from NATO's perspective (ibid p. 93–96).

### **3. Methodology**

This chapter focuses on the methodology used in this research. This research is done using qualitative research methods, which means that the topic of small sample size is thoroughly analyzed, in a way that does not utilize methods of frequency, amount, or quantity (Labuschagne 2003 p.100). Qualitative research goes in-depth into the set research subject, through means of qualitative analysis methods. In this thesis, I utilize document analysis, which I supplement with qualitative content analysis. Document analysis and content analysis are sometimes used interchangeably, even though there are differences between them. Document analysis allows the selection of different documents and passages in the documents, which can then be analyzed through processes of content analysis (Bowen 2009 p. 28). Document analysis is often used with another qualitative research method, in a way that allows combining different research methods on the same phenomena of interest (ibid p. 28). This is exactly, what I attempt to utilize as well, through supplementing document analysis with content analysis. In this chapter I will elaborate on the utilized research methodologies, and how they are utilized in this research.

#### **3.1 Document Analysis and Data Sample**

As the research topic is focused on specific state actors, foreign and security policies, and perceptions, documents are fruitful material. As the researched governments publish their documents about their foreign and security policy goals and plans, these documents can be then analyzed in order to understand the perceptions. This is why document analysis is a great methodology for this type of research. As elaborated before, document analysis is a research method that systematically studies electronic and printed documents and data (Bower 2009 p.27). Document analysis has advantages and disadvantages, and it is worthwhile to understand what some of them are. The advantages of

document analysis include the easy availability of data. This means that nowadays, as most documents are on the internet, it allows the researcher to collect a variety of data relatively quickly. Moreover, document analysis can be praised by its “exactness”, which means the analyzed data can be easily referenced, the data has the right exact names of people involved and there is a lot of detailed data on several matters, which makes document analysis a viable method (ibid p.31). In addition, utilizing document analysis can be criticized for the researchers’ “biased selectivity” (ibid p.32). Biased selectivity comprises of insufficiently collected research documents, which can then lead to altered results and conclusions. This means that “biased selectivity” is not necessarily a flaw, but it has the potential to be. Besides having advantages and disadvantages, there are several ways of utilizing document analysis in research. The specific way I attempt to utilize document analysis is through coding.

Coding is a way of utilizing document analysis. Code in this instance can be a short phrase or a word which represents condensed attributes and essence capturing parts of the data (Saldaña 2013 p. 3) The document analysis coding allows for the researched materials to be thoroughly scrutinized, which then forms a strong basis for the analysis. Coding units can be defined by the researcher if the units benefit the purpose of answering the set research question. As an example, newspaper articles have been previously used as a unit of coding (Tichý & et al, 2022). Based on this model, I approach the primary data by utilizing keywords, which are coded words or phrases from the text. The keywords in this research were “NATO”, “Threat”, and “Co-operation/Cooperation”. In the case of the government document under research being written in another language than English, a translation of the keyword was used instead. To exemplify this further, the keyword “Threat” was translated as “Uhka” for the Finnish language documents. The keywords were created in order to answer the set research question, as I attempt to analyze changed perceptions of Sweden, Finland, and Norway to NATO, these keywords presented the primary data in a way that allows the analysis to be done

coherently. “NATO” was chosen as a keyword due to natural reasons, as that keyword presented the instances where NATO was discussed in the documents. “Threat” was chosen as keyword due to NATO being an alliance offering security guarantees and changed perceptions in this instance can be perceived in the form of changed threat perceptions. Moreover, the decision to use “threat” as a keyword solidifies the linkage to the theoretical frameworks supplementing theory, the balance of threat theory. “Co-operation/Cooperation” was chosen as a keyword as it reveals more co-operation in a context where NATO is not mentioned. For example, as this research attempts to study changed NATO perceptions, it is intrinsic to further analyze the researched countries’ relations with the US, as it is the most significant NATO actor. By utilizing this keyword, it is possible to research the data in a way that portrays the perceptions of the countries to the US. To exemplify this, in the document “Setting the course for Norwegian Foreign and security policy” on page six, there is a list of Norwegian foreign policy choices, which includes the phrase “seeking to maintain our close transatlantic ties and further developing our long-term security policy cooperation with the US.” (2017). This became under the light of the research due to coding with the keyword “cooperation”. As the coding was done using these keywords, there was a lot of material to unpack. In this instance, I eliminated the sections which were not relevant to the thesis, such as parts about the climate related threats as they are not directly linked to the NATO perceptions (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, 2020 p.12).

Since this study focuses on the Swedish, Finnish, and Norwegian perceptions towards NATO, it is pivotal to choose the right documents, thus a discussion about data sample is relevant. The documents for this thesis were chosen based on their relevance to the set research question, and as I attempt to understand the position of a state on this matter, it was natural to choose official government documents. Official government documents can be seen to portray the “official” standpoint of a state, and thus portrays the state’s perception on different matters. Due to the timeframe of 2014–2022, the

research primary data consists of documents published after 2014. Despite not having many documents directly from the year 2014, the documents from 2015-2022 describe and discuss matters of 2014, due to it being significant for the annexation of Crimea. Moreover, in order to widen the base of research materials for this study, I chose to include speech and comment data from relevant people concerning the foreign- and security policy of the set countries. The speech data is supplemental in nature, and thus not included in the primary data sources. This decision was additionally supported by neoclassical realisms' focus on FPOs, also known as foreign policy executives. The Finnish government publishes documents in Swedish, Finnish, and English, while the Swedish government publishes mostly in Swedish and some in English, and the Norwegian government publishes mostly in Norwegian and English. The government documents used in this thesis were chosen by their relevance to the set topic, and as they are government publications, they are very easily accessible on the websites of the governments they were published. The chosen documents are concerned with foreign and security policy, thus making them applicable to this research.

### **3.2 Qualitative Content Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis was first used already during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and thus it has a long history as a method of analysis. Moreover, content analysis is a method of analyzing different verbal, visual, or written communication (Elo & Kyngäs 2008 p. 107–108). However, despite being in existence for a longer period of time, content analysis has evolved during that time. One change that has influenced change in content analysis is the rise of digital technology, as computers have brought new ways to utilize content analysis (Ford 2004 p. 1110). These developments in the qualitative content analysis have made it possible to research large data sets more quickly than ever before.

Through qualitative document analysis coding, I had data which needed to be categorized in order to answer the set research question. Thus, the approach I chose for this research was one of the thematic categories. In his book *Basic Content Analysis*, the author Robert Weber describes how content analysis can be utilized in order to identify certain themes in a text (1990 p.41). Moreover, Neuendorf describes how the themes arise from the read text and are not externally implemented (2017 p.10). This was the approach I had for this research, with few remarks. Due to the large primary data set, it was important to factor material that was received by utilizing document analysis methods. Then for that large data set, I applied the creation of content analysis thematic categories. That is how the thematic categories were formed organically, and thus the two methodological tools were supplementing each other, in order to answer the research question. To continue from this, I have created five thematic categories. The categories rose from the primary data sources. The decision to utilize these categories allowed concise and logical analysis of the primary data and thus was a significant decision in the sense of research strategy. The analysis is based on these categories, but the categories are also supporting one another in the attempt to answer the set research questions. The thematic categories instill several major variables of neoclassical realism, including leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations, and leader's perception (Ripsman 2011 p.9). For example, in the category "Perceptions towards the US" there are distinct impacts on strategic culture, which thus impact perception and decision-making. Besides utilizing neoclassical realism, the balance of threat theory is additionally used in the analysis of the thematic categories. The created categories are "Perceptions of the changing security environment", "Perceptions of the USA", "Perceptions towards co-operation", "Perceptions towards NATO membership", and "Threat Perceptions". The categories arose from the read primary data, but in order to further elaborate on the creation and utilization of the content analysis method more clarification is necessary. The category "Perceptions of the changing security environment" was created as the "open doors policy" concept was prominent in the analyzed documents. The name comes from the way Sweden and Finland seem to answer to the

changed security balance, by highlighting the open doors policy option. The category “Perceptions of the USA” rose from the primary data as the US relations and co-operation was significant to the set countries and to their NATO relations. As the US is the most significant actor in NATO, there was a need to understand the relations with the US, as the attempt was to establish a linkage between the countries’ relations with the US to the NATO relations. The category “Perception towards co-operation” arose from the fact that there is heavy co-operation between NATO and the researched states. The co-operation is played out on several levels and in several different contexts, thus creating a need to elaborate and analyze the change that might have occurred there. The co-operation category pays slight attention to the co-operation happening outside of the main NATO-context, as to shine a light on the levels of co-operation. The reason for this was to include relevant data regarding the joint Nordic co-operation and security guarantees in contrast to the security guarantees of NATO. This was done in order to answer the set research question. The category “Perceptions towards NATO membership” was created due to the material from the primary data concerning perceptions about being a member of NATO or in the case of Norway, already being a NATO member. This category establishes a direct look at how the countries have perceived membership in recent years. The final category “Threat Perceptions” was influenced by the keyword “Threat” and as NATO is a defense and security alliance, there was a need to analyze the perceived threats and their impacts on NATO perceptions. Below there is a table depicting three instances of passages that were part of the creation of the “Threat Perceptions” -category. Naturally, there were a lot more of these passages which worked as a fundamental basis for the category. Moreover, you can see the keyword “threat” and its Finnish translation “uhka” in the passages.





Figure 2. Exemplary model picturing the formation of the thematical categories

The rough translation for the quote in Figure 2 from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland is “Despite the increasing tensions in the global political environment, Finland is not under military threat” (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020 p.25). To elaborate more on why these two research methods were chosen specifically, I want to underline the research components of perceptions of the state actors and the theoretical framework. As I research perceptions of states and focus on the changes in them, it is beneficial to use government documents as primary data. Moreover, the chosen methodologies (keywords and thematic categories) allowed me to find the intricate changes in the large sample size. Additionally, as the theoretical framework consists of neoclassical realism and balance of threat, I want to be able to find out the small components and factors influencing the happened changes, thus the decision to use these two research methods was necessary.

## **4. Analysis**

This chapter focuses on the analysis of the primary and secondary data. Firstly, I will begin the analysis by covering each thematical section which arose from the analyzed materials. In the thematic section, the information is presented state by state. Moreover, the thematic sections are formulated to correspond to a chronological order, which means that the earlier documents are analyzed first and then proceeding to the more recent documents. At the end of each thematic section, there is compiling reflection it portrays in terms of the aforementioned theoretical framework of neoclassical realism and balance of threat theories. In order to answer the research question, I chose to closely pay attention to the changes and events that are described in the primary data. This means that while conducting the analysis and have a focus on the happened changes during the set timeframe, I additionally summarize to bring clarity to the analysis. Moreover, I want to emphasize that in the analysis, the respective government bodies are considered a whole, underlining that whether the data is from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Ministry of Defense, they are considered to represent the opinions and perceptions of the governments they originate from.

### **4.1 Perceptions of the Changing Security Environment**

The perceptions of the changing security environment can be understood as a shift in the international arena. The shift impacting the perceptions towards NATO can be best explained by the unjust attack on Ukraine by Russia. The shift resulted in the NATO membership applications by Sweden and Finland. This chapter's analysis will focus on the perceptions towards NATO's open door policy in the context of Sweden and Finland. The Open doors policy means that a state keeps this metaphorical door open to possibly enter through in the future. The metaphorical door can concern multiple things, but in the case of NATO, the open doors policy is used in the context of joining NATO/becoming a

member of NATO. The open door policy is based on the 10<sup>th</sup> article of NATO's founding treaty, also known as Washington Treaty (NATO 2023).

The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty. Any State so invited may become a Party to the Treaty by depositing its instrument of accession with the Government of the United States of America. The Government of the United States of America will inform each of the Parties of the deposit of each such instrument of accession. (Article 10 of NATO's Washington Treaty 1949)

The door is mainly kept open by NATO, but countries interested in possible membership have their own reasons for ensuring that NATO keeps the door open. The concept of NATO's open doors policy has been important for Finland and Sweden. Especially, Finland has highlighted NATO's open doors policy in its government publications, it almost seems to work as a sort of safety blanket. As the support for the actual NATO membership has been previously quite low among both the people of Finland and most political parties, it has been convenient for Finland to highlight the possibility of joining NATO. In 2016, the Swedish Defense Minister Hultqvist underlined that Sweden has no interest in applying for NATO membership and that he had understood that Finland does not have an interest either (Huhta, 2016).

Finland and Sweden have been emphasizing NATO's open door policy in their respective governmental publications (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2016, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020, Regeeringskansliet 2016, and Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2022). In the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy of 2016 NATO's open door policy

is highlighted to be important not only to Finland but to other European countries, which have the ability to further the goals set by NATO's framework agreement (2016 p.25). Moreover, similarly, in the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy of 2020, the Finnish government emphasizes that it is very important for Finland's security that NATO's open door policy continues on, for countries that fulfill the criteria for membership. However, they also highlight the importance of having a good relationship with Russia (2020 p.25). This exemplifies the attitude that Finland has promoted for years, that it is important to be close to the West, but at the same time, not to unnecessarily provoke Russia. Finland's perception towards NATO is positive, but the membership seems to be a bit frightening, in the way that Finland does not want to ruin its relationship with Russia nor give any reason for Russia to be provoked. In the Finnish government document outlining the changes in the overall security environment, the government emphasizes the commitment by the United States to the security challenges of Europe as well as their commitment towards the open doors policy set by NATO (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2022). It needs to be underlined, that the aforementioned document was published on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April in 2022. Finland submitted its NATO application just over a month later, combined with the way that the NATO-open doors policy is perceived in this document could suggest that NATO discussions were ongoing steadily at the time of the publication, although this is speculative. In the case of Sweden, government documents have a more neutral way of implicating the open door policy. For example, the government document "Säkerhet I ny tid (2016)" essentially just mentions the open door policy and how it is based on NATO's 10<sup>th</sup> article. Moreover, the documents highlight how European countries who share the core principles set out by NATO as well as bring contributions to the security of the alliance can then be considered as a potential member (Regeringskansliet 2016 p. 127–128). This means that the existence of NATO's open door policy and thus NATO membership is just mentioned in addition to outlining the fact that the requirements for a state's NATO membership are understood. One of the more recent documents "Deterioration of the security environment – implications for Sweden" underlines

NATO's decision to keep the open door policy still open (2022 p.16). When this is analyzed in the larger context of what happened it seems to work in a way that the Swedish government is strongly discussing the potential NATO membership in the document. The document itself was published on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March in 2022, less than a month after the larger war broke out in Ukraine.

The emphasizing and even naming the NATO's open door policy can be argued to have been perceived as a way of counter threat towards Russia, or at least as a sort of security guarantee. It is not a secret that Russia has disagreed with NATO's expansion in the East after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia had hoped that Finland and Sweden would not become NATO members, as that would have strategic implications for Russia in the whole Arctic region, as well as the Baltic Sea region. Russian officials have even gone as far as saying that Finland's NATO membership poses a threat to Russia, which must be reacted to (Trevelyan 2022). If both Finland and Sweden were members of NATO, NATO would be much closer to Russia than ever before as Finland shares over 1300 kilometers of border with Russia. The utilization of NATO's open door policy can be seen in a way that if Russia acts in a way that poses a threat to either Finland or Sweden, they could always refer to their earlier statements of possibly becoming a member of NATO. The perception that Finland and Sweden have is one of having a good relationship and development with NATO, but at the same time being steadily unprovoking. This way, Russia acknowledges that there is always the possibility of either one or both of them becoming NATO members if they act in a threatening or radical way. As previously elaborated, the open doors concept has been prevalent in several official government documents of both Finland and Sweden and thus it seems to have been important for the governments even when NATO membership wasn't probable, due to low support. In the case of Finland, the NATO option could be argued to satisfy domestic politics at a higher level, meaning that the NATO option and deepening NATO relations can be seen to satisfy NATO supporters while also not activating the option could have pleased anti-NATO politicians and leaders. Promoting open doors policy can be

viewed as a strategic move, but I argue that it can also be considered as a perception. The linkage between open doors policy and perception comes from its symbolic essence. By continuing to promote the open doors policy, Finland and Sweden shows the way they perceive the surrounding security environment. As I elaborated on the way that the countries seem to utilize the concept of open doors policy, it is at the same time a way of perceiving the surrounding world, thus making it fit in the realm of perception. In the context of neoclassical realism, domestic policies can influence foreign policy decision-making (Ripsman 2011 p. 9 & 14), and thus the domestic policy of having NATO as an option did not increase the pressure of joining the organization, until the events of February 2022. In the case of Sweden, the deeply rooted military non-alignment and neutrality created domestic circumstances where there was almost no public interest to join NATO (Cottey 2018 p.75), however, things took a turn after the large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine. The factor influencing the decision to activate open doors route is arguably influenced by the attack.

## **4.2 Perceptions of the USA**

The United States of America can be argued to be the biggest if not the only superpower in the world. In the international system, it is arguably the strongest player that has immense strength both in soft and hard power. It has the biggest army in the world, and consequently, it has the biggest army of all NATO countries with over three times bigger army than the country with the second biggest army, Turkey (NATO 2022). This is one of the reasons why the US has such a significant role in NATO. However, it is intrinsic to understand that all of the researched states; Finland, Sweden, and Norway have all bilateral relations with the United States, outside of NATO-related matters. Even when analyzing purely the defense and security policies, one can see that the countries work closely with the US. However, due to the significant role of the United States in NATO as well as the underlined

significance of the US in the chosen documents, it is necessary to analyze the relations of the set countries with the US.

As the analysis focuses on Swedish perceptions towards the US, the analysis of government documents shows that already in 2016, cooperation with the United States concerning defense and security-related matters was developing in a rapid manner (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2016 p. 5). According to the aforementioned document, the deepening of the cooperation is based on the mutual interest of the countries. Moreover, the document underlines how the cooperation will both broaden in scale, as well as be deepened in the current operations. Here, the Swedish foreign ministry emphasizes how the relationship with the United States has vital importance for Sweden. In this document, the Swedish government lists two reasons why the relationship is so important for them. First of all, in the context of security policy, Sweden wants to strengthen the commitment of the US to the security of northern Europe. Secondly, in the context of defense policy, Sweden wants to enhance armament co-operation and training activities, as well as the overall development of Sweden's military strength (ibid, p.5). Moreover, Sweden gives credit to the US for giving beneficial support for the overall enhancement of Sweden – NATO relations (Regeringskansliet 2016 p. 82). In the more recent Swedish government bill "Total Defence 2021-2025" (2020), Sweden continues to underline the importance of Sweden – US relations, but additionally, it acknowledges the shortcomings of the relationship. According to the document, the European Union and the United States have clearly taken different positions on large, global questions. In this instance, they do not specify the global questions that are in question. Besides the different positions taken, the government bill underlines the notion that the US foreign policy can sometimes be described as being unpredictable (2020 p. 31). Obviously, unpredictability raises some eyebrows when trying to formulate longstanding foreign- and security policies. But the overall perspective in the document emphasizes the significance of good Sweden-US relations as well as highlights the importance of the

US for the whole region. In the most recent document “Deterioration of the security environment (2022)” there is no mention of the United States being described as unpredictable. Rather, in the designated “United States” section of the document, they mostly describe how the US and Sweden have a very similar points of view towards security issues in the Baltic Sea area and in northern Europe. Besides, describing similar views, Sweden additionally emphasizes the need to deepen the relations in the areas of defense and security in a bilateral way. Moreover, Sweden and the US share a joint will to the improvement of the capabilities to work and act jointly in crisis situations (2022 p.23). The way that Sweden promotes the US in the 2022 document promotes the connection and linkage between the US being the most significant NATO actor, and the Swedish changed perception of Sweden towards NATO in 2022. As the US is the most significant player in NATO, it would be counterintuitive to criticize its foreign policy planning as unpredictable. However, it has to be noted that the US foreign policy might have transformed to more predictable according to Swedish standards, but there is no mention of this happening, thus creating a scenario where it seems that Sweden wants to portray the US in a more favorable light.

In the case of Finland, the official government document from 2016 “Ulko- ja turvallisuuspoliittinen selonteko” highlights that the United States is an important ally, who has importance for Finland in both regional and global issues. Moreover, the US has much importance for Finland bilaterally, as they work together on several issues relating to for example security, defense, energy, Arctic issues, and so on (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2016 p. 24). After describing the importance that the US has in a bilateral context, it is then made clear that the commitment of the United States towards NATO and to military efforts in Europe, in general, continues to have great significance for Finland’s overall security. This claim strengthens the connection in the research, why the US is an important actor to study in the context of NATO. Additionally, it is described how Finland attempts to deepen its relations with the US, due to its aim of achieving better national defense capabilities and



the ability to have better co-operation, in both personnel and material sense (ibid p.24). When analyzing the data in relation to Finnish – US relations, I noticed that the Finnish government believes that deep co-operation with the US enhances the security in the Baltic Sea region as well as in the wider European region (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2018 p.15). The similar mentality of Finnish government giving importance to the US commitment towards European security is visibly portrayed in the “Government report on Finnish foreign and security policy 2020” (2020 p. 30). In general, the overall message seems to be very similar in the 2016 and 2020 documents, where Finland emphasizes both multilateral and bilateral relations with the United States. It is reflected that Finland sees the US as one the most important players in terms of military, as the United States is spoken about in the context of NATO, NATO development, joint military co-operation, and development (ibid p.30). However, as I analyzed the government report on the changed security environment from 2022 in relation to the Finnish perceptions towards the US, I noticed that there was an increasing emphasis on the significance of the US. An example elaborating this can be found:

*”Yhdysvallat on merkittävin sotilaallinen toimija ja Nato sitoo Yhdysvallat institutionaalisesti Euroopan turvallisuuden takaajaksi. Yhdysvaltojen näkökulmasta Euroopan turvallisuus ja yhteisen puolustuksen toteuttaminen on järjestetty ensisijaisesti Naton kautta. Yhdysvallat ei ole myöntänyt Naton ulkopuolisille Euroopan maille julkilausuttuja kahdenvälisiä turvatakuita”* (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2022 p. 22).

The rough translation for this quote is “The US is the most significant military actor, and NATO binds the US institutionally to back Europe’s security. From the point of the US, European security and common defense are organized mainly through NATO. The US has not given European non-NATO members public bilateral security guarantees” (ibid. p 22). This means that Finland names the US as

the most significant military actor in the world and additionally, Finland elaborates how the US is the primary guarantee concerning the security of the EU. In this instance, Finland seems to perceive European security as being to some extent outsourced. Moreover, Finland acknowledges that European security is ensured through NATO (ibid p.22). Moreover, it is added that Finland didn't have security guarantees at that point from the United States, as the US didn't publicly give security guarantees to European countries which were not NATO members. This emphasizes the Finnish perspective, as it describes the US as being the protector of the EU area but continues to elaborate on how the US's protection reaches only NATO members. Here, it is clearly elaborated that Finland sees that even though wider Europe has these security guarantees from the United States, Finland is still outside of those, and that NATO is the way to get those guarantees. Additionally, it is elaborated that the deterring effect of NATO comes from the military capabilities of the US and its possession of nuclear weapons (ibid p. 24).

Norway on the other hand has a longstanding but a bit different type of relationship with the United States as it has been a NATO member since NATO was formed back in 1949. When analyzing Norway's data, I noticed that the approach of Norway is different compared to the other two countries under research. This can be seen in the way that Norway does not have to highlight the open doors policy, but rather they elaborate on how it is important to maintain their close ties with the United States and deepen their co-operation in long-term policy advancements concerning security co-operation (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017 p. 6). Unlike Finland and Sweden, Norway points out that the security challenges posed in 2017 were not seen in the same way in the United States and Europe. Moreover, it is pointed out that Norway perceives that as the US contributed over 70% of the defense spending in NATO, it might not be on sustainable ground, as the US might lose interest in safeguarding Europe. However, it is clearly important for Norway that this does not happen, as it might jeopardize European security. Norwegian perception of the US in this case can be

described to be uncertain. The uncertainty is derived from Norway's fear of the continuation of the US interests in European security. The best scenario for Norway is to keep the focus of the US in NATO and thus enforce NATO's protective aura. Furthermore, Norway seems to be interested in developing its defense material production, in co-operation with the United States. Norway aims to develop its own capabilities in this matter, as they acknowledge that allied countries including the US have vast knowledge and expertise in this field (Norwegian Ministry of Defense 2021 p. 5). So, in essence, Norway seems to emphasize the continuation of good pre-existing relationships but also make them more overarching for example in the field of military technologies. This can be considered as increased perception of trust towards the US. Moreover, Norway's perception towards the US can be described as being trusting, despite the differences they may have had about the wars the US had in the middle east. The trust is best manifested in the trust that Norway has portrayed towards NATO's protective nature, as the US has the biggest influence and army in NATO. If Norway would not have trust in the US, it would most likely portray its perception towards NATO as well.

When the set countries' US relations are reflected through the lenses of neoclassical realism, one can see that there has been a strong systemic will towards deepening relations with it. Despite having different starting points, namely already being a member of NATO, having a longstanding reputation of being militarily non-aligned, or having Finlandization in its history, there is still a common will to pursue stronger relations with the US. The perception that the nation's leaders have portrayed in their states' foreign policy, indicates a strong commitment towards the West, despite not seeing everything eye-to-eye, instead of the mighty power next to them in the East. Moreover, the researched states have been developing their relations with the US for a long time, in the context of foreign and security policy, and outside of it. The soft power influence of the US in these countries can be argued to be significant, which in turn impacts the strategic culture variable, and thus impacts perceptions and decision-making. Additionally, this emphasizes the proposition set by the balance of power theory,

as it demonstrates the commitment to align with arguably the strongest superpower due to the perceived threat of Russia to the researched states. Instead of bandwagoning with militarily regional hegemony, Russia, the chosen countries balance the perceived threat by aligning themselves with the US.

### **4.3 Perception towards Co-operation**

Finland, Sweden, and Norway have all clearly highlighted their co-operation with NATO. However, the co-operation practically manifests itself in different forms due to political situations, such as Finland and Sweden not being NATO members yet, or in practical terms due to the countries having their own individual needs. Co-operation exists in the NATO framework and outside of it. As an example of this, Sweden, Finland, and Norway have signed a trilateral statement of intent for military co-operation already back in 2020 (Ministry of Defence of Finland 2020). This co-operation is an intrinsic part of NATO relations, as it solidifies the bilateral relationship between NATO and the set state, despite it being a member or not. In terms of neoclassical realism, the co-operation establishes a firm basis affecting strategic culture, due to having even decades of different level co-operation with the US.

In order to have a better understanding of the co-operation between researched states and NATO, it is vital that EOP is explained briefly in advance. NATO held a summit in Wales in 2014. At the summit, NATO launched its Partnership Interoperability Initiative, also known by its acronym PII. The idea behind PII was to solidify the relationship between NATO and its members and partners, as well as deepen the pre-existing relationships (NATO 2021). As part of the PII, NATO recognized that as their operation and co-operation with different NATO partners was getting more and more complex and multifaceted, there was a need for a tailor-made co-operation programme. This was the

base to create NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Programme, which is widely known by its acronym, EOP. Enhanced Opportunities Programme offers a different special possibility for co-operation. The co-operation in this context can be for example security-related to political consultation, information sharing, and better access to joint exercises. Shortly after the 2014 summit in Wales, Finland, and Sweden, along with Australia, Georgia, and Jordan were granted recipients of "opportunities" (ibid).

In the case of Sweden, the co-operation has become increasingly more prominent after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This can be seen in the Swedish participation in the aforementioned NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Programme, which according to Swedish government satisfies their need for such a programme, despite it needing further development (Ministry of Defense of Sweden 2014 p.42). In the 2016 publication *Säkerhet i ny tid*, Sweden outlines accurately that the EOP was tailored according to the requests made by Sweden, and that the United States was highly involved in the process of getting it tailored (Regeringskansliet 2016 p.82). This highlights both the special importance of the US in the process, as well as the development of the overall co-operation. The way Sweden highlights the tailoring of EOP to the needs of Sweden gives the indication that Sweden perceives the tailoring as a very important factor, which is arguably special in NATO's operating method, despite EOP having five other countries with tailored programmes. The EOP lasted originally three years, which was extended by another three years in 2017 (Ministry of Defense of Sweden 2020 p.72). The document also highlights that the co-operation between NATO and Sweden has deepened since 2014 (ibid p. 72), thus after the annexation of Crimea. On a practical level, through the co-operation Sweden has created regional crisis scenarios, which are operationally practiced in the joint exercises. All of this indicates a careful decision of having closer relations with NATO little by little, without becoming a NATO member at that point. Besides working bilaterally with just NATO, the document emphasizes trilateral co-operation between NATO, Sweden, and Finland, as they have the same Northern and Baltic Sea region to defend. The enhancement of the relations is

said to be happening at two different levels, at the civil-servant level as well as the political level (ibid p.72). When analyzing more recent publications concerning co-operations on different levels, the importance of the Enhanced Opportunities Programme becomes more evident. In 2022, Sweden outlines EOP as the main foundation for Sweden's NATO partnership. It is elaborated that the EOP has been focusing on co-operation through information exchange, political dialogue as well as different military exercises and training (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2022 p.27). In general, I argue this to be a highly over-encompassing level of co-operation between NATO and Sweden. Moreover, the significance of EOP seems to have become more important for Sweden, as it started as an enhanced opportunity programme on top of the already existing Swedish-NATO relations but then evolved to be the backbone and the foundation of their relations.

When analyzing Finnish perceptions towards co-operation, it is intriguing how Finland portrays Enhanced Opportunities Programme as a beneficial tool for Finland to uphold and develop NATO-Finland relations (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2016 p. 25). EOP seems to be a utilizable tool, which Finland uses in order to enhance its relationship with NATO. However, Finland underlines couple of things that need improvement and enhancement in the near future, such as concrete practical co-operation and regular political dialogue (ibid p. 25). Finland's perception towards NATO co-operation seems to be complicated in the sense, that it has been taken in the EOP programme, but still, there is a need to improve co-operation in the aforementioned fields. As the EOP was created for special relationships and tailor-made for the chosen countries, it is significant that Finland outright explains the lackluster elements that it perceives in the opportunities programme. The Foreign and Security policy document of 2020 describes how NATO's focus on common defense has developed its way of interacting in the changed security environment. According to the document, the significance of northern Europe has increased due to the changes in the security environment, which has led to the increased co-operation between NATO and Finland, but also between NATO

and Sweden (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020 p. 29). Moreover, Finland claims to utilize different means of co-operation efficiently to increase its overall defense capabilities. It is mentioned that the co-operation is done in a way that is beneficial for both parties, Finland and NATO. Besides working in the framework of EOP, it is said that Finland utilizes the so-called 30+2 group in its co-operation work. The 30+2 comes from the thirty NATO members plus Finland and Sweden. In the 30+2 group, one of the aims is to advance the relations of Finland and Sweden towards NATO (ibid p.29). Finland takes part in NATO exercises concerning the 5<sup>th</sup> article of NATO but acknowledges that the 5<sup>th</sup> article does not encompass Finland, as it is reserved plainly for full-fledged NATO members. Finland takes part in these exercises only in the form of an allying companion country (ibid p.30). Essentially, EOP works as the biggest framework for co-operation, even though there are other ways of co-operation as well. In the document from 2022, it is described how the co-operation between the EU and NATO has gotten increasingly deeper, but also there is a will to make it even stronger (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2022 p. 12). Finland acknowledges that Sweden is the most important bilateral ally for Finland in this matter. It is said that the Russian attack on Ukraine has increased the depth of the Finland-Sweden relationship and highlighted the co-operation between the countries in different international contexts, especially in regard to NATO. The EOP is vaguely mentioned, in the way that Finland and Sweden have said to have moved more or less hand-in-hand toward deeper NATO relations in recent times. Conveniently, Finland and Sweden have joint plans for European security concerns, most likely due to their similar situations. Essentially, this underlines the significance of Finland and Sweden having quite similar plans in the security policy aspect, towards the directions of EU and NATO (ibid p.20). In the document, Finnish government describes how they have made joint plans with Swedish government about a joint military alliance, but that the plans are not that far, as it demands parliamentary support from both countries. Finnish government specifically underlines in its official government document that the military alliance between Finland and Sweden, would not be comparable with NATO (ibid p.20). If both Finland and Sweden would be

NATO members, they would not need to have a special military alliance built just for them, to put it plainly, NATO membership would solve that issue. The NATO membership and especially the 5<sup>th</sup> article creates a situation, where an attack on Finland would be considered as an attack on Sweden, despite it having 28 other members.

Norway's perception towards NATO co-operation is different in its approach as Norway can utilize its full potential, due to its membership in the organization. In the past, Norway has taken part in NATO co-operation relating to the Somalian coast pirate attack issues, to safeguard tradeship routes (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015 p. 17). Furthermore, Norway has attempted to develop EU maritime security issues, which can be seen as a way to bring experience from NATO co-operation to other levels of co-operation. Additionally, Norway promotes Nordic security (ibid p. 14 & 17), which subsequently can be very beneficial for Finland and Sweden, as Norway has great access to NATO intel and knowledge, which then can be shared with the Nordic neighbors. Norway can be thus said to perceive its role as a NATO member, but also as part of the Nordic countries, and help both organizations in a way that is good for all the parties. Later on, Norway highlights how its actions have the goal of making NATO a stronger alliance. According to the 2017 document, Norway is supporting the strengthening of NATO against old security-threats, but also against newly risen security threats (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017 p.6–7). It is also said that Norway continues to promote stronger security related cooperation, with both the EU and NATO, and thus increase the importance of the Nordic and European dimensions in its security policy (ibid p.7). This indicates its perception of utilizing different security structures and in a way mixing the benefits of them. Norway highlights the change in co-operation after the Crimean annexation of 2014 and elaborates on how NATO's focus has been shifting back from external crisis management operations to the defense of NATO member states (ibid p. 11). The shift can be seen as a clear indication of NATO preparing for Russia's unpredictable power politics. Another point where this shows, is



Norway's commitment to contribute to NATO's presence in the so-called eastern flank (ibid p. 15), in order to co-operate with NATO's eastern member countries. However, in hindsight, one of the more interesting cooperation, was Norway's promotion of more in-depth co-operation between Ukraine and NATO (ibid p.27). Besides promoting co-operation between different actors, Norway's methods of co-operating with NATO are exercised through an exchange of different types of intelligence, constant dialogue in the political context, enhancement of situational awareness, and ongoing consultations with different partnering countries and NATO (ibid p.31). In the 2021 "Cooperation for Security" -document, Norway underlines the BEAC, also known as Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Arctic Council, and NATO as important structures through which Norway promotes its significant bilateral interests (Norwegian Ministry of Defense 2021 p. 40). Norway additionally establishes its co-operation with NATO in combatting terrorism, European security, and enhancement of transnational relations (ibid p. 54 & 79). Moreover, it is prevalent that in the document Norway acknowledges the need for more balanced and thus fair sharing of burden in the context of NATO (ibid p. 79). Since 2014 there has been a rising number of discussions about the role that the US poses in NATO, and to wider European security, which in this case means that European NATO countries had constantly not met the 2% military spending. Norway's perception seems clear in this matter, as it highlights the need for NATO members to increase their military spending so that they fulfill their commitments. In the speech by the Norwegian Prime Minister in 2022, the prime minister elaborates that since the larger attack on Ukraine, Norway has taken measures that it is not able to talk about, in order to counter the threat posed by Russia. Additionally, the Norwegian Prime Minister underlines the fact, that both Norway nor NATO are not a threat to Russia, namely that neither of those will attack Russia, but instead, stays strong in their common defense (Office of the Prime Minister 2022). In essence, Norway contributes to NATO co-operation in a unique way compared to Finland and Sweden, due to having strong multi-level NATO co-

operation, enhancement of maritime security issues, bilateral and trilateral co-operation with Finland and Sweden, as well as bringing NATO expertise to the table.

One can see here that there has been longstanding continuity in deepening co-operations with NATO by all the set research countries. The co-operation is solidifying the foreign and security policy aims of set countries, in order to enhance the countries' relative power and defense capabilities. In terms of neoclassical realism, it is possible to argue that as the co-operation continues for years, it additionally influences the strategic culture, which thus impacts the leader's perception, decision-making, and lastly policy implementation (Ripsman 2011 p. 9). If security and common defense is highly linked with NATO compatibility and joint exercises, it becomes even harder to change the whole paradigm concerning defense. This narrows down the options that Finland and Sweden have to two, which are either continuing with the old path of having deepening relations and co-operation with NATO, without the membership or its protection. The other path is to fully become a member with all its perks and responsibilities. The possibility of discontinuing military co-operation at this stage, when the Eastern-European region is becoming more unpredictable and unstable, would not be a convincing option regarding the foreign and security policy aims of the countries, thus against their own interests. When this is implemented into the context of all iterations of the theory of realism, I would argue that the factor impacting the increasing co-operation with the US is partially the need to ensure the survival of the state. As the US is a superpower, aligning with it increases the probability of surviving in a destabilized world.

#### **4.4 Perceptions towards NATO Membership**

The perception towards NATO membership with the set countries has clearly changed from against membership towards pro-membership in the 2014-2022 timeframe in the case of Finland and Sweden.

On the other hand, Norway has been a supporting member of NATO during that time. But how have those perceptions evolved, and how have they been framed? The perceptions towards the membership distinctively portray how the countries have discussed about the implications of the membership as well as its perks and disadvantages. In terms of the used theoretical framework, it is intriguing to understand how the perceptions influence variables of neoclassical realism.

In the case of Sweden, the support for NATO membership in the polls has been less than 40% favorable before 2022. The conversations around the potential membership have been in a sense quite low, but there have been discussions about the effects of the membership. For example, in the document from 2016, Sweden declares that the potential NATO membership does not probably mean higher cost in overall defense expenditure (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2016 p. 9). In this case, it means that they perceive the membership from a very pragmatic level of costs. However, Sweden underlines that as a NATO member, it could be more difficult to promote a global ban on nuclear armament (ibid p.9). This comes from the realization that three of the then 28 NATO members are nuclear weapon countries, the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. Additionally, one of NATO's deterring effects comes from the fact that they have nuclear weapons can are willing to use them in the case of nuclear war. Moreover, in 2016 the Swedish inquiry describes that potential Sweden membership pros and cons should not be made solely according to the Finnish/Swedish perspective, but instead, it should be made concerning the general regional point of view (ibid p.10). The document underlines that Russia is opposing the potential membership of Sweden but does not imply that the decision should be influenced by the potential threat of Russia (ibid p.10). In the document from 2020, Sweden underlines that the support for NATO from the US point of view is well established in Congress and in the military establishment. Moreover, Sweden highlights that the US is keen on having NATO's burden sharing more equal, in the sense that the member countries fulfill their military spending requirements (Ministry of Defense of Sweden 2020 p. 31). The way

that Sweden portrays this elaborates on how it is important that if Sweden was to become a NATO member in the future, they would need to agree fully to the terms set up by NATO, and the way that several countries in Europe have handled their military spending requirements, would not necessarily be possible in the future. Sweden additionally points out the Russian point of view, that Sweden could face Russian counteraction if Sweden decided to apply for NATO membership, and that the hybrid threats have already increased towards the member states of EU and NATO (ibid p.16). However, Sweden exemplifies how Russia has already publicly announced its opinion on Sweden and Finland already getting too close to NATO with their ongoing co-operation and military exercises (ibid p.16). Despite the perception of Russians, Sweden has continued to impose sanctions on Russia along with its Western allies, which indicates that Sweden strongly continues on with their own foreign policy goals, despite the threats by Russia. However, when analyzing the document from 2022, there is a clear change in the perception of Sweden. When the document was written, the support for NATO membership was higher among Swedish people, and now Sweden outlines that the Chinese government is against NATO expansion and that if Sweden was to become a NATO member, it could increase tensions in global security between Europe and China (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2022 p. 11). However, it is outlined that the reason why China is against Swedish membership is due to the support that China has towards Russia's interests in security. As for the potential membership, Sweden elaborates on how the Finnish Government is getting more comfortable with the idea of NATO membership, as Sweden decodes that Finland thinks that NATO membership is the number one option for them to ensure the safety of Finland (ibid p.14). Moreover, Sweden names neighboring Finland as their closest defense and security partner, and outlines that if Finland decided to apply for NATO membership, it leaves Sweden in a position where it is the only non-NATO member both in the Baltic and Nordic region, thus increasing its strategic interests towards Russia, and thus potentially weakening Sweden's overall security (ibid p.33-34). Through this, it is possible to assume, that Sweden is evidently interested in whether Finland would join

NATO. Moreover, Sweden elaborates on NATO being now stronger than it has been for decades, due to NATO's defense and security co-operation with Europe and the overall strengthening of NATO's main tasks (ibid p. 15). The perception of the possibility of promoting a nuclear armament ban has also changed since 2016, as in the 2022 document Sweden outlines that several other NATO countries are promoting nuclear disarmament and that if Sweden was to become a member of NATO, it would still be possible to promote non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (ibid p.33). This is another great example, of where the perception of Sweden has changed, as the combination of NATO membership and nuclear weapons ban used to be thought of as an issue, but the perception clearly changed and now it is not thought that way. The factor impacting the change concerning nuclear disarmament can be linked to the changed security situation in Europe. Due to the Russian attack on Ukraine, Sweden was forced to reconsider its approach to military non-alignment and its perception of NATO membership. The strengthening done by NATO is briefly elaborated in the form, that the document outlines what NATO has done and where. For example. Sweden outlines NATO's reinforcement actions in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia as well as additional battle groups to Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria (ibid p.15–16). The perception that Sweden has here, can be assumed to be very positive towards NATO, and quite potentially to membership as NATO is getting more prevalent and stronger, due to the common threat posed by Russia, as well as the common willingness to aid and defend Ukraine. The way that Sweden portrays NATO as giving extensive support to its Eastern members, in the face of danger can seem very assuring for the potential membership application. Sweden clearly describes how the main effect that NATO membership would have on Sweden is the activation of the collective security guarantee that is coded within the 5<sup>th</sup> article. Sweden underlines that through membership, it would strengthen its security and participate in the security of like-minded NATO members (ibid p. 31–32). This unmistakably portrays the perception that Sweden perceives about the main effect of NATO membership, which is in their

case the security provided by the 5<sup>th</sup> article, as well as the responsibility to protect other NATO countries if they are attacked by a foreign power.

The Finnish perception towards NATO membership has varied during the last decade. As elaborated previously, Finland has often discussed the potential membership and highlighted its open door policy option. In 2016, in the Finnish perception, NATO is a stabilizer in the Baltic Sea region, and that Finland and Sweden share the same security environment with NATO. According to Finland, NATO membership would fundamentally affect the security of the Baltic Sea region, and the membership itself would have significant far-reaching effects on Finnish foreign- and security policy (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2016 p. 26). Additionally, Finland acknowledges that even though there is multi-level co-operation with NATO, there is no joint protection that comes from the 5<sup>th</sup> article. However, due to the joint exercises and other co-operation, there are no barriers to the Finnish membership in NATO according to Finland (ibid p.26). This just highlights the perception that Finland wants to be ready for NATO membership, at least on paper. The preparedness and joint exercises have made the joining possible. In the document from 2020, Finland raises similar points as Sweden did that as NATO's focus has once again shifted towards its original primary task of common defense, it has changed the co-operation development for Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020 p. 29). This underlines the significance of NATO's decision to focus on Europe and common defense, as both Finland and Sweden point it out as a positive and strengthening factor. Again in 2020, Finland raises the point that even despite the in-depth co-operation with NATO, it is still not under the protection from the 5<sup>th</sup> article and thus does not get the full benefits from NATO as it is not a member (ibid p.30). Here, Finland underlines its perception regarding NATO membership, that it is only through the membership in which Finland would receive the full security guarantee of NATO. Without the membership, the exercises remain only exercises. Despite this knowledge, Finland clearly does not have domestic pressure for obtaining the membership, as there

was no large-scale war in Europe. In addition, Finland points out that it wants to keep its foreign and security policy maneuverability, in order to have the possibility to join NATO. It is also pointed out, that with the joint NATO exercises, there would not be any barriers to joining NATO if Finland decides to go with that route. The decisions concerning NATO membership are always done by analyzing the overall situation in the context of foreign and security policy and the decisions are made after deep analysis (ibid p.30). In the document from 2022, it is outlined that the public support for NATO membership has risen extensively and that both the Finnish government and the Swedish government have received citizen's initiatives concerning NATO membership (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2022 p.11). Moreover, Finland continues with the same point it made already in 2020, that foreign and security policy maneuverability is very important to Finland, and that potential NATO membership would be decided based on the current foreign policy situation (ibid p.14). There have been discussions about EU-based security alliances, that would in some ways be relatable to NATO, but be fully by and for members of the European Union. However, back in the 2022 document, Finland acknowledges that despite the conversations about the joint security alliance, there are no actual command structures for the EU defense nor existing strategic military plans. In addition, as many EU countries are already members of NATO, the thought of an EU security alliance with similar tasks as NATO would not have been economically or politically viable (ibid p. 18). The perception that Finland has at this point is that there will be no other alliances such as NATO, at least in the short-term range. The lack of political and economic will to formulate an EU alliance, with the credibility of NATO's protection would be almost an impossible task. Thus, Finland outlines the options it has in the context of military alignments, or essentially the lack of options. Moreover, Finland emphasizes the defense co-operation that it has with Sweden, but also describes how the potential NATO membership requires strong parliamentary support and will from both countries (ibid p. 20). It was especially interesting for the analysis that Finland automatically includes Sweden in the thought of potential NATO membership. It could have easily been that Finland's perception in this is

that Sweden makes its own defense alignment decisions, and there could be discussions between the neighbors going in together but going without one another is a potential choice. too. However, that clearly was not the case. It is underlined that if Sweden and Finland would become NATO members, it would increase security in the Baltic Sea region, and stabilize the overall region in a longer timeframe (ibid p. 25). Moreover, it is emphasized that the threshold for instigating military actions would be higher in the region if Finland and Sweden would be NATO members. The perception of Finland in this case seems to be optimistic about NATO and the effects that it has on overall security. The statement of the Baltic Sea region being safer can be linked to the geopolitical facts of the Baltic Sea being essentially surrounded by NATO in the event of Finland and Sweden being members. When it comes to membership, Finland acknowledges that the biggest effect that it would have for Finland is being part of the security guarantees set by the 5<sup>th</sup> article of NATO. (ibid p.25). Moreover, Finland underlines that all new members join NATO with the responsibilities and rights set in the treaties, indicating that the duty of having military spending on the right level and the preparedness to defend allying nations is effective immediately. Additionally, Finland argues that if it had the whole NATO strength behind it, its defense would have a much stronger deterring effect. However, Finland highlights that if it was attacked and it was a NATO member, it would have the strength of the whole alliance behind it, and the attack would be responded to with predetermined and practiced maneuvers, according to the joint defense planning (ibid p. 25). The perception that Finland portrays with this is both obvious and empowering. First of all, no one is going to argue the statement that if you were part of NATO, your deterring effect is stronger. If one attack is considered as an attack towards thirty countries, it will most likely have a deterring effect. Secondly, the way Finland described how it would defend against the potential attack by using exercised maneuvers portrays its perception of having strong support against attacking forces if it was a member of NATO. Another question that Finland claims it would face is concerned with the extent of the potential NATO membership. The extent on how the membership could be manifested in comes in several forms, such as a permanent



NATO base in a country, permanent NATO troops in a country, or hosting NATO's nuclear armament in a country. None of these things are mandatory for NATO membership, but instead, they are always discussed during the membership negotiations. The negotiations depend on the upcoming members' own wants and needs and of course the resource availability of NATO. Moreover, since the end of the 1990's NATO's policy on its expansion has been that no nuclear weapons are placed in the new member countries nor new permanent NATO bases or troops (ibid p. 26). Of course, there are exceptions based on the new member's requests. In addition, Finland outlines that there will be no need to discontinue its conscription-based military service, even if it was a NATO member (ibid p. 26). Finland wants to emphasize its perception on the issue that several NATO members in the past have decreased their military spending as they became part of NATO due to being then protected by the larger alliance and especially the US. Finland clearly does not want to go with that route, and it is also an indication to NATO that Finland would be a strong member, due to it having an interest in upholding its own military strength. In terms of costs, the current military budget would approximately increase 1 to 1,5% if Finland was a member, but as Finland already has its military spending around 2% of its GDP, there is no need for large military spending increases (ibid p. 26). As Finland has steadily increased co-operation with NATO during the researched timeframe, one could argue that Finland perceives NATO as an organization that it sees itself becoming a member under the right conditions. Moreover, as Finland underlined its attempt to mitigate all the barriers regarding military compatibility, it created a situation where a rapid application is possible, which ended up happening in the earlier half of 2022. This clarifies the perception that Finland has of NATO indicating it wanted to keep NATO close and the route to membership unproblematic.

Norway's perception towards NATO membership is yet again different due to Norway being a member since 1949. Norway outlines its interests best guarded in the framework of NATO, but also with the UN and Norway's European allies (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015 p. 6 & 17).

This perception highlights Norway's commitment to NATO and the protective presence that comes to Norway with it. Moreover, Norway emphasizes that NATO will develop and become stronger in order to continue to be able to protect its members against varying threats that NATO or Norway might face (ibid p. 14). This portrays Norway's interest in solidifying NATO's power as its member it has the opportunity to influence NATO from the inside. Norwegian perception in the start is established as a sort of "influencer". It perceives that the organization is capable of transforming its operating method to answer whatever changes the security environment faces. Similarly to Finland and Sweden, Norway underlines the change that happened in NATO after the annexation of Crimea, in the sense that it shifted the focus to deterrence and collective defense, as it used to be more in "out-of-area" crisis management (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017 p. 11). Moreover, Norway points out that most member countries have stopped cutting their defense spending and are strengthening against Russia (ibid p. 11). This indicates Norway's perception that NATO is strong and solid during these uncertain and turbulent times, and that perception towards the membership is positive and confident. In addition, Norway perceives its role in NATO as strategically important, in a way that even if Norway is a country with a relatively low population, it can still benefit NATO with its membership. This becomes evident when Norway elaborates on the importance of the region it is working in, as well as its role on NATO's Eastern flank (ibid p. 14–15). Additionally, Norway elaborates on its actions in the context of being a valuable member in its attempts to develop co-operation with its key allies, namely the Netherlands, France, the UK, Germany, and the US outside of the NATO framework, which would assist these countries bilaterally, but also strengthen NATO as a whole (ibid p. 33). Moreover, Norway highlights itself as practically *being* NATO in the North in many ways (ibid p. 29). Norway being NATO in the North would obviously change if Finland and Sweden were to become NATO members, which could potentially also decrease the burden that Norway has had. Norway promotes NATO by saying that the alliance is both predictable and clear, which boosts Norway's security to a level, it would not be able to get to on its own (ibid p. 29).

Norway's perception is again trusting and highly positive towards the membership. Moreover, Norway clearly states that it believes NATO to be the only credible organization in Europe, which has actual commitments concerning defense as well as real capabilities to back those defense commitments. In addition, Norway states that NATO should not be replaced by another security policy actor, even if the other actors are developing (ibid p. 31–32). This highlights Norway's perception of NATO membership being the only credible and reliable defense alliance in Europe, despite the joint Nordic attempts at a common defense. This also emphasizes Norway's commitment to stay in the alliance, as there is no better alternative when it comes to joint defense. Norwegian NATO perception in this case emphasizes its strategic culture which can be seen in the trust in NATO's defensive capabilities. In the 2021 document, Norway continues to support NATO and highlights its capabilities to actually protect its members during a crisis situation. In addition, Norway attempts to make NATO more relevant and effective in its cause (Norwegian Ministry of Defense 2021 p. 73 & 79). In addition, when analyzing the data in the context of Norwegian approach to the NATO membership, it is clear how in two different occasions they promote their active role towards the membership, in the sense that it describes itself as one of the founding members of NATO and points out that they are not a passive observer, but actively developing it (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019 p. 7 & Norwegian Ministry of Defense 2021 p.69). This yet again highlights Norway's perception of being a committed and proud member, who strongly believes in the capabilities of the organization and the potential development. Norway raises the issue of burden-sharing in NATO and commits itself to the target of 2% set by NATO (ibid p.73). When I analyzed Norwegian military expenditures, I noticed that Norway has gradually risen its military expenditures in order to meet the requirements (Norway Military Spending 2023). This portrays a picture of Norway seriously committing to the goals of NATO and its cause. In essence, from 2014 to 2022, Norway's perception of NATO membership has been positive and active. Norway continues to believe in NATO's ability to deter foreign threats toward its member states, but also Norway has

confidence in its ability to influence NATO through its membership. When analyzing the data in relation to Norway's perception of NATO membership, I noticed that as NATO has shifted its main focus to its original roots and core duties, Norway's perception of that was very positive. It continued to emphasize NATO's core duties and its importance for NATO.

Regarding the influencing variables of neoclassical realism, it is possible to say that leaders' perceptions in Finland and Sweden have not had a major visible impact on the NATO membership question. Moreover, the related effects between intervening variables such as state structure and leaders' perceptions are unproven. Meaning that despite the structure of the state regarding the role of the Finnish President in foreign policy formulation, compared to the Swedish and Norwegian model of having foreign policy acted out by the government led by the prime minister. For example, in the Finnish case, the political will towards becoming a full member has been quite low, which changed after Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022. Similarly, the overall support towards NATO membership from both the Finnish and Swedish populations has been quite low before the large-scale attack, but after February 2022, the support rose significantly. Thus, it is very difficult to say if the two influenced each other, meaning that if political will affected the citizens' perspective about the membership or the other way around. However, it is fair to say that the large-scale attack was behind the rise of favorable views toward the membership in general. Moreover, there has been deepening relations with NATO and the US, which has yet again been embedded in the countries' strategic culture, which according to neoclassical realism affects perception, decision-making, and policy implementation (Ripsman 2011 p.9).

## 4.5 Threat Perceptions

Perceptions of threats are always present in global politics. The root cause behind the feeling of threat and the state posing the threat might differ depending on the perspective, but for Sweden, Finland, and Norway these are very similar. Finland, Sweden, and Norway are all Nordic countries with similar values, and they also face the same threat in the context of foreign and security policy. Moreover, the proximity of seemingly more imperialistic Russia close to their border has an influence on their foreign and security policy. How are these threat perceptions portrayed in their government publications?

Sweden remarks on new challenges in the Baltic Sea region, most likely referring to challenges brought up by the Russian annexation of Crimea (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2016 p.8). This points to the possible threat set by Russia, even though the large-scale war was still far away. When Sweden points out these new challenges, it mentions NATO's change of focus to European defense, which indicates that the annexation raised questions about a threat to Sweden as well. In addition, Sweden portrays that if it was a NATO member, it would restrict Russia's maneuverability in the Baltic Sea region (ibid p.10), thus being a counter to the threat. However, at this stage, Sweden considers membership as a partly restricting option for Sweden's foreign policy too. In the 2020 document, Sweden describes the threat perceived from the Russian rhetoric of countermeasures if Sweden joined NATO (Ministry of Defense of Sweden 2020 p. 16). This indicates clear acknowledgment from the Swedish side of the actual consequences concerning what might come if it joined the Alliance. From the Swedish perspective, it seems that they pinpoint threats that would be present if it joined the organization, but also the threats that it constantly has when it is outside of the organization. Moreover, Sweden underlines the in-depth co-operation that they have with NATO and also with the United States (ibid p. 3 & 72–73), which indicates that even if the US is a

superpower in the military context, it does not perceive a threat from the US side. In the recent 2022 document, Sweden's position on the threat is much clearer. It states unprovoked Russian aggression on Ukraine as an example that if you're just a NATO partner, there is no protection from imperialistic Russian aggression (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2022 p. 5–6 & 20). The perception of Sweden is set in this matter, that despite the in-depth co-operation, if one wants the best available protection from Russia, only membership in NATO would be sufficient in countering that. However, Sweden acknowledges the threats by Russia they are under during the transition period if they chose to apply for NATO (ibid p.5). In this instance, Sweden outlines that they have the readiness to respond to some of the risks relating to the threats, but not to all, such as Russian attempts to influence (ibid p.5). One of the concrete ways Sweden describes the Russian threat showing in Russia's actions is the increase of Russian troops in their neighborhood (ibid p.10). This could mean increasing deployment of Russian military troops in the Baltic Sea, as well as near the Finnish border and the high-North. The threat perceptions are also visible in the way that Sweden discusses Beijing's support towards Russia and how China is against NATO expansion, as Sweden describes these raising tensions between the West (Europe and the US) and China. There is a clear juxtaposition between the liberal like-minded West and then Russia and China. This shows Sweden's perception concerning the appreciation of values and partially value-based threat assessment. The US which portrays itself as a liberal democracy along with the EU, is facing opposition from illiberal democracies such as Russia. Sweden in this case aligns itself with the West, as their values are better represented alongside them. Due to the risen threat, Sweden has strengthened its defense and security-related co-operation with NATO as a countermeasure (ibid p.20). However, as Sweden has noted, only membership in NATO would bring the whole security guarantee instilled in the 5<sup>th</sup> article.

In 2016, Finland outlines that it follows the changes in the security environment in the discussions about the potential NATO membership (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2016 p.26). This

indicates that the changes in the security environment are concerned with varying levels of perceived threat from Russia. Thus in 2016, the threat was not clearly strong enough for Finland to realistically apply for membership in NATO. When it comes to decreasing tensions, Finland sees that NATO's expansion in the Balkans has strengthened stability in the area and thus NATO has the potential to decrease tensions. Finland acknowledges that co-operation with NATO increases predictability as well (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2020 p.20 & 29). In this case, Finland seems to perceive NATO as an organization that can mitigate the threat that Finland receives from the East. However, at this stage, Finland's policy is to hold the NATO door open and to increase military exercises and other co-operation with NATO in order to respond to the threat. Moreover, similarly to Sweden, Finland mentions increasing co-operation with the US in the defense and security context and highlights the importance of the US in this matter (ibid p. 24–25 & 30). Essentially, Finland is aligning itself with a superpower, to counter the threat that Russia poses. Additionally, Finland describes how despite the increasing tensions, there is no increased threat towards Finland (ibid p.25). This established Finland's perception to the relatively safe situation in Europe before the large-scale war. Much to no surprise, in 2022 the perception concerning threat by Russia has increased significantly. Finland describes a fundamental shift in the security environment due to the Russian attack on Ukraine and underlines that the war started by Russia is a threat to the overall security and stability in Europe (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2022 p. 7–8). As Finland previously stated in 2016, it constantly analyzes changes in the security environment and acts based on the assessments. Now, the time came when the threat perceived by Russia was considered so big, that there was no option but to truly consider applying for NATO membership. However, Finland states that despite the war in Ukraine, Finland is not under imminent threat at the moment (ibid p.10). This can be understood in a way that Finland approaches this fundamental change in the security environment with caution and patience. It is quite possible to assume that since Russia launched an attack on Ukraine, its resources are tied up with the ongoing war, and the chance for ignition of a new large-scale war can

be considered smaller. After Russia attacked Ukraine, Finland states that it has deepened co-operation with both Sweden and NATO, in order to enhance situational awareness (ibid p.25). The deepened co-operation can be considered a reaction to the increased threat level, and as a way to signal Russia that Finland is awake and watching the situation. When analyzing the types of threats, there seem to be two kinds of threats for Finland. Either stay out of NATO and potentially face the threat of seemingly imperialistic Russia by itself or becoming a NATO member and receive possible consequences from Russia due to the membership. However, the reason why Finland would join NATO is the security guarantee, implying that Russia would not dare to act against a NATO country. Both of these options contain risks and later in the spring of 2022, it became clear which route Finland went with. This makes the Russian threats toward Finnish membership more concrete. According to the 2022 document, Russia has publicly elaborated its negative perception towards NATO expansion, especially concerning the membership of Finland and Sweden (ibid p. 27). To counter this threat that Finland might receive during the application period, Finland states that it should incorporate strong co-operation with Sweden to mitigate the potential reaction by Russia (ibid p.27). This underlines the fact that Finland has already prepared a “route” for NATO membership, at least in the sense that it has made strategies concerning the application period. Finland seems to perceive the Russian threat seriously and has made plans to mitigate these threats.

As a NATO member, Norway naturally has a bit different perception of the threats. In the 2015 document, Norway emphasizes its attempts to modernize NATO to ensure its strength in encountering any threat it might face (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015 p. 14). This portrays Norway’s perception of already being under the protection of NATO against potential threats, as the attempt is to develop NATO to keep threats at bay in the future as well. The Norwegian will to develop NATO seems to be well placed especially after the Russian large-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022, as already in 2015 Norway describes how European security is facing a challenge due to the annexation of



Crimea (ibid p.6). Norway additionally highlights threats it perceives for wider global security. This includes terrorism, ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), piracy, cyber threats, and organized crime (ibid p.5). For global security threats, it offers solutions in the form of developing both NATO and the UN (ibid p.5–6). This highlights Norway's trust in multinational organizations and their potential in shaping the world into a better place. In 2017, Norway continues to emphasize its will to develop NATO in order to have better tools when it comes to responding to old and new security threats (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2017 p. 6). Moreover, it now outlines the change in the security environment brought about by the annexation of Crimea, and it describes how Russia has increased its military capabilities and additionally become unpredictable about its intentions (ibid p.11). Moreover, unlike Finland and Sweden who are not members of NATO, Norway points out a threat inside of NATO which rises from growing differences between NATO member countries. The differences can be seen for example in the military spending levels that each country has, and especially in the fact that the US is contributing more than 70% of the overall spending of NATO (ibid p.11). As a member, Norway has the capability to openly discuss about the different difficulties that NATO faces. Despite, the fear that Norway has concerning keeping the interest of the US in NATO and especially in its core task of safeguarding Europe, Norway still seems to have trust towards the US. This can be seen in the way Norway underlines attempts to maintain close bonds and develop security policy co-operation with the US (ibid p.6). This emphasizes Norway's perception of aligning with the US rather than increasing co-operation with Russia. To further exemplify this, Norway elaborates on how it has stopped most military co-operation with Russia. However, Norway persists that it is open about its military activities, in order to mitigate potential misunderstandings by Russia (ibid p.29). This portrays Norway's perception of cutting down co-operation with Russia, as it perceives it as increasingly more threatening, but also wants to not provoke Russia unnecessarily. Furthermore, Norway elaborates on how the relations between NATO and Russia are quite tense, and that creates a situation where is a poor climate concerning negotiations (ibid p.35). This portrays

Norway's perception regarding the increased tensions between East and West, which have arguably gotten worse since Russia annexed Crimea. When analyzing the data in relation to threat perceptions of Norway in 2019, it is clear how Norway linkages the shift in NATO's reforms to Russian aggressiveness (Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019 p.24). This indicates how Norway while being a member of NATO feels the joint threat, that is emitted from Russia and its offensive intentions. Despite of the perceived threat, Norway emphasizes its trust in NATO's security (ibid p.16). Similarly to the 2019 document, in 2021 Norwegian government highlights NATO's 5<sup>th</sup> article as the backbone of the common security guarantee (Norwegian Ministry of Defense 2021 p.39), thus emphasizing its importance in countering threats from different sources. After Russia started the large-scale war against Ukraine, the Norwegian Prime Minister was quick to point out that NATO is not posing any military threat to Russia, despite Russia portraying NATO in that light (Office of The Prime Minister 2022). Russian attack on Ukraine posed a threat to the West, which is why Norway stated that they prepared due to the changed security environment (ibid). One thing to point out concerning the deepening co-operation between Norway and the US is that it is plausible to argue that Norway made its decision in this matter already back in 1949 when it joined NATO. For Finland and Sweden, the decision to deepen co-operation with the US has a bit different significance than the decision to deepen made by Norway. Nonetheless, all of the researched states Finland, Sweden, and Norway willingly align themselves with arguably the strongest superpower in the global landscape and not against it.

In terms of perceived threat, it is clear that all of these countries deem Russia as a threat to some extent. This can be seen and understood from the way that the set documents describe Russia's actions as being more unpredictable and unjust. Moreover, this can be seen from the way that the researched states set their defense. This means that all of these researched states have deepened their relations and co-operation with Russia's arguably biggest nemesis the United States. All of these actions

combined portray a picture, where there is a common threat to Nordic security portrayed by the Russian Federation. As the theory of neoclassical realism portrays perceptions and how they influence the decision-making processes, which in this case arguably impacted the decision to join NATO in the case of Sweden and Finland. When this is reflected in the proposition set by the balance of threat theory, which entails that countries do not just align themselves against the biggest power, but against the biggest perceived threat, one can see that the actions taken by Sweden, Finland, and Norway have fulfilled the qualifications set by the theory. Moreover, these countries aim to counter Russia's attempt of becoming a regional hegemony, by aligning with its adversary the United States. The alignment comes with risks, in the sense that both Finland and Sweden brought up, which is a provocation. Both of these countries do not want to instigate Russia's aggressivity into them, but also, they want to distance themselves from its influence and threat. There is always the possibility of Russia putting the 5<sup>th</sup> article to the test and seeing if NATO is truly as strong as it claims to be. However, it is clear that this poses an existential threat to Russia as well, which is why it seems that all of these countries view that risk to be marginal, and thus align themselves with the United States. Moreover, if this is perceived through the four categories proposed by the balance of threat theory which were aggregate power, proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions (Walt 1985 p. 9), one can see that the proximity aspect is obvious threat indicator for all of the researched states, as they are neighboring Russia. Evidently, they don't perceive China as big of a threat as Russia, clearly due to proximity. The argument about China not being considered as big of a threat can be backed by the research data, as most threat perceptions are concerned with Russia. Secondly, the category "aggregate power" establishes a similarly easy comparison, as both geographical comparison and overall economic capabilities comparison all goes in Russia's favor in this context. Economic capabilities go to Russia's favor, due to Russia being the 11<sup>th</sup> biggest economy in the world, at least in 2021 before the large-scale war (World Bank 2021). In the same World Bank listing, the first Nordic state appearing on the list is Sweden, with comfortably eleven places behind as the 22<sup>nd</sup>

biggest economy. The third category “offensive capabilities” is essentially a harder one to compare, because usually countries do not want to disclose the full strength of their armed forces, but two different sources list Russia as having either the second or third most capable army (Global Firepower 2023 & Lowy Institute 2023). The sources for the strength of the armed forces can be argued to be unreliable to some extent, but at least they provide some context and information on the armed forces comparison. The Nordic countries do not reach the top 20 positions in either of the rankings. Therefore, the proximity, aggregate power, and offensive capabilities are strongly in Russia’s favor, making Russia threatening on these indicators. However, Germany outranks Nordic countries in the same categories as well, but still, Germany is not perceived as a threat. Out of the four categories, established by the balance of threat theory, there is only one left, which is offensive/hostile intentions. This is the one factor that saw an immense shift during the year 2022. As Russia attacked Ukraine, it portrayed its offensive and hostile intentions on the European stage. Thus, I argue that the balance of threat theory can explain why Sweden and Finland decided to apply for NATO membership. Through the categories, it is possible to outline one thing that has clearly shifted, and it is the perceived offensive intentions, through which Sweden and Finland perceived Russia’s hostile intentions to be on a level, where it was time for them to apply for membership.

## **5. Conclusion**

The aim of this research was to find out how the perceptions of Sweden, Finland, and Norway had changed towards NATO after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and what factors influenced the changes. To further understand the changes, a theoretical framework consisting of neoclassical realism and balance of threat theory was utilized. The research displayed clear changes in the perception towards membership in several fields. The concluding chapter starts by recapping thematical sections of the research, in order to highlight the answers to the set research questions. After elaborating on the changes, the focus shifts to the limitations and shortcomings and then to suggestions concerning possible future research on this matter.

### **5.1 Summary and Results**

The thematic categories analyzed in this thesis arose from the researched primary data and the first thematical category analyzed was “The Perceptions of the changed security environment”. NATO option and open doors policy was repeated by Sweden and especially Finland to an extent that it could be argued to have been used as a political tool against Russia. As Russia did not want Finland and Sweden to join NATO. Finland and Sweden could try to maintain their Russia relations by emphasizing that it is always a possibility for them to join the alliance. Due to domestic factors such as the historical background of the countries impacting strategic culture, it was always just an option for Finland and Sweden to join NATO. The perception towards the open doors policy stayed similar, until the events of February 2022. In this case, the factor impacting the activation of the open doors policy is the Russian large-scale attack on Ukraine, as Russia’s perceived offensive intentions shifted in the perceptions of Sweden and Finland. The second thematical category was “Perceptions of the USA”, which namely focused on the changes in the perceptions of the USA. In this category, it

became evident how all the researched states have deepened their relations with the US on multiple different levels. The change in this category is a change in quantity and quality to higher and deeper regarding co-operation. The deepening of the relations did not mean seeing everything eye-to-eye, as the states have had disagreements with the US, but it is significant that despite their differences of opinion, they claim to share similar values, which the researched states also highlight in their official government documents. The factor influencing the increasing co-operation with the US can be linked to the overall essence of all iterations of realism, the survival of the state. Moreover, it became clear how the states do not bandwagon with the regional military hegemony, Russia, but instead, they focus on co-operation with Russia's nemesis the United States. The way that for example Swedish government describes the US as being sometimes unpredictable in 2020, but then does not emphasize the unpredictability aspect at all in the 2022 document highlights the change at least on a superficial level. The third thematical category was "The perception towards co-operation", which as the name suggests, focused on the different levels of co-operation and the changes in their perceptions of them. In the larger context Sweden, Finland, and Norway have all increased their co-operation with NATO, but also in other contexts as well, such as bilateral agreements. For Sweden and Finland, being part of NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Programme (EOP) has evolved to be an important tool for their co-operation. Specifically, Sweden describes how EOP has transformed itself to become the main foundation for the Sweden – NATO -partnership (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2022 p.27). On the other hand, Norway highlights the change it has perceived in its NATO co-operation, due to the annexation of Crimea. NATO's main focus has shifted from foreign crisis management operations back to its roots to the defense of NATO member states, which satisfies Norway. The fourth thematical category was "The perception towards NATO membership", which was focused on the perceptions that the set countries had on the membership and its impacts. There was a clear change in the perception as at first Finland and Sweden discussed about alternative sources for security, such as deepening joint EU security forces, but by 2022, both countries agreed that no alternative security

guarantee could provide the same level of protection and insurance as NATO can. Other options were not seen as viable. Moreover, there were visible changes in the way Sweden perceived its nuclear proliferation programmes, as first it was thought to be difficult to be a member of NATO and promote nuclear disarmament, but in 2022, it was deemed plausible after all. The factors influencing this change can be linked to the changed perception of NATO, as after February 2022 Sweden was forced to reconsider its military non-alignment policy. One reason why Finland and Sweden did not join NATO before is related to the historical roots, namely Sweden being militarily non-aligned and Finland trying to maintain its balance between the East and West. Moreover, public support for the membership was not high before 2022. The fifth and final thematic category was “Threat perceptions”. The fifth category established the rise of the Russian threat, as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 instigated questions about Russia’s agenda, but not to the extent that Sweden and Finland would have joined NATO. However, before 2022 both Sweden and Finland emphasize the risks of joining NATO, as Russia had threatened to use vague countermeasures in case, they joined the alliance. Vague in the sense, that Russia didn’t provide much information on what kind of measures it would take. In 2022, the threat of joining was seemingly mitigated, as Russia had already attacked Ukraine and Sweden and Finland had to act on it. Norway perceived risen threat to the West by Russia after the annexation of Crimea, and after the large-scale attack, it started preparing due to the changed security in Europe. Moreover, Norway has been developing NATO in order for the organization to be as effective in its core duty of protecting its member states.

The biggest change to European security in 2022 was clearly the Russian attack on Ukraine. This caused rapid changes in the security policies of Sweden, Finland, and Norway. In the case of Sweden and Finland, they decided to apply for NATO, while Norway emphasized strengthening NATO. NATO has become more relevant than it has been for years, and soon the alliance will have two new members, providing security to the Northern Hemisphere. The implications of these findings relate

to the increasing knowledge concerning the NATO relations of the researched states. The fast accession to NATO in the case of Finland and Sweden despite their different historical backgrounds underlines the significant shift in the European security environment.

The limitations and shortcomings of this research relate to the scope of the research as well as the utilization of the theoretical framework. The research would have benefitted from more primary data, meaning expanding the number of used governmental documents. However, as this is a master's thesis, it would have exponentially increased the amount of analyzable data making it too long, or the analysis too shallow. The decision to go with the used primary data was due to the necessity of having enough material from different years regarding all of the researched states. With the utilization of more primary data, it would allow even stronger results, as there would be even more material to refer to. Moreover, the utilization of the theoretical framework would have benefitted from a more pragmatic approach.

Future research in this matter could benefit from a larger sample size. In order to have an even better representation of Nordic countries' perceptions of NATO, Denmark could be added as one of the researched states. Moreover, by adding Denmark to the researched states, it could be fruitful to make divided categorization of Norwegian and Danish perceptions and Finnish and Swedish perceptions and find out how they compare categorically. However, adding Denmark to the research increases the amount of primary data significantly. Another interesting perspective would be analyzing how the Nordic military co-operation evolves now that the states are in NATO. Do they uphold their level of joint Nordic military co-operation, or will it diminish due to them being members of NATO?



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