



FACULTY
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A Gradual Path from Strategic Restraint to a Middle Power:

The Transformation of Finnish International Identity from EU
Accession to NATO Membership

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Abstract

This thesis examines the transformation of Finnish international identity between Finland's accession to the EU in 1995 and its membership in NATO in 2023. The study is significant as Finland's NATO accession has frequently been portrayed as a sudden and unprecedented rupture in Finnish foreign and security policy following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Challenging this interpretation, the thesis argues that the NATO membership should instead be understood as the culmination of a longer historical trajectory characterized by gradual Western integration, evolving security practices, and the continuous rearticulation of Finnish international identity. Within this process, Finland increasingly repositioned itself from a militarily non-aligned small state toward a Western-oriented middle power embedded within Euro-Atlantic political and security structures. Guided by the research question: "How and to what extent has Finland's international identity been redefined between EU accession in 1995 and NATO membership in 2023?" The study draws on constructivism, Europeanization, small-state theory, social power, and place branding. It employs a qualitative, historically informed single-case study design combining document analysis with semi-structured expert interviews analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings suggest that Finland's NATO accession reflected a long-term process of Western reorientation, with the 2022 invasion of Ukraine acting as a critical accelerator of an already evolving trajectory.

Key words: Small State, Europeanization, International Identity, Gradual Change, Pragmatic Continuity

Word Count: 19 772

List of Abbreviations

CFSP	EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy
EU	European Union
IR	International Relations
NATO	The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NYT	The New York Times
UN	The United Nations
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
YYA Treaty	Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance

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1. Introduction: The Transformation of Finnish International Identity

“Times change. And when the world changes, our actions must also change. That is what happened, and Finland became a member of NATO.”

Sauli Niinistö

President of the Republic of Finland

New Years Speech January 1st, 2024

In early 2022, Europe’s security environment deteriorated as Russia escalated pressure on Ukraine and challenged the existing security order. For Finland, this felt both unprecedented and historically familiar, reviving memories of navigating relations with the powerful eastern neighbor. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 confirmed these concerns, marking a turning point in Finland’s long-standing effort to balance Western integration with cautious diplomacy toward Russia.

Finland’s foreign and security policy has historically been characterized by caution, flexibility, and adaptation to changing geopolitical conditions. During the Cold War, Finland pursued a policy aimed at preserving national sovereignty, while avoiding direct confrontation with the Soviet Union under the 1948 Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance (YYA Treaty). This approach has often been described through the concept of Finlandization, referring to Finland’s strategy of balancing relations with the Soviet Union while maintaining ties with the West (Quester, 1990).

After the Cold War, Finland moved closer to Western political and security structures. EU membership in 1995 marked a key step in this shift. Although Finland remained militarily non-aligned, it increased cooperation with Sweden and the United States while maintaining relations with Russia. This period was characterized by flexibility in Finnish security policy.

At the same time, Finland took on a more active international role, focusing on stability, mediation, and multilateral cooperation within the EU, the Arctic region, and the United Nations (Middleton, 2023; Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland n.d). Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 challenged this approach and reduced Finland's role between East and West. In response, Finland used its "NATO option" and joined NATO in 2023, shifting toward clearer alignment with Western security structures.

1.1 Research Problem and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine how Finnish international identity has been constructed and redefined between 1995 and 2023. Adopting a constructivist approach, the research focuses on the role of political discourse, historical legacies, and institutional contexts in shaping how Finland understands and positions itself in the international system. Using document analysis and expert interviews within a historically informed research design, the study traces continuity and change across the three decades.

The study has four main aims. First, it analyses how Finnish international identity has been articulated and reproduced in political discourse and policy documents over time. Second, it explores how processes of Europeanization have shaped Finland's foreign and security policy identity, particularly in relation to its integration into Western institutions. Third, it examines how Finland, as a small state, has navigated changing geopolitical pressures, especially in relation to Russia, in redefining its international role. Fourth, it considers how Finnish international identity has been shaped and interpreted through the concepts of social power and place branding. The research questions are designed to ensure coherence between theory, method, and empirical material (Halperin and Heath, 2020).

Accordingly, the main research question of the study is:

How and to what extent has Finland's international identity been redefined between EU accession in 1995 and NATO membership in 2023?

To address the main research question, the study is guided by four sub-questions:

1. *How has Finnish international identity been articulated in political discourse between 1995 and 2023?*
2. *How has Europeanization influenced Finland's foreign and security policy identity?*
3. *How has Finland, as a small state, navigated geopolitical pressures, particularly in relation to Russia, in redefining its identity?*
4. *How has Finland's use of social power and place branding contributed to the construction and transformation of its international identity?*

This study defines international identity as a state's official understanding of its role, status, and belonging in the world. It is produced by political elites, communicated through discourse, and negotiated between the state's self-understanding and how others perceive it (Boon, 2022). International identity is relational (shaped in relation to external actors), contextual (dependent on geopolitical circumstances), and distinct from national identity, which focuses on internal questions of "who we are" (Coe & Neumann, 2011).

This study is situated within Global Studies, as it examines the transformation of Finland's international identity in the context of changing global and regional security dynamics. It explores how a small state navigates historical legacies, institutional integration, and geopolitical change while positioning itself within frameworks such as the EU and NATO. By analyzing the evolution of Finnish identity and foreign policy, the study highlights the interaction between domestic political narratives and broader international developments. In doing so, it contributes to Global Studies scholarship by offering insights into small-state agency, identity transformation, and adaptation in an increasingly interconnected and uncertain global order (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2017).

The study is significant as Finland's NATO accession has frequently been portrayed as a sudden and unprecedented rupture in Finnish foreign and security policy following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Challenging this interpretation, the thesis argues that the NATO membership should instead be understood as the culmination of a longer historical trajectory characterized by

gradual Western integration, evolving security practices, and the continuous rearticulation of Finnish international identity. Within this process, Finland increasingly repositioned itself from a militarily non-aligned small state toward a Western-oriented middle power embedded within Euro-Atlantic political and security structures.

1.2 Scope of the Study

As previously stated, this study examines the period 1995–2023, covering approximately three decades. The year 1995 serves as a natural starting point, as Finland's accession to the EU marked a significant shift in the country's foreign policy orientation and in how it positioned itself in relation to Europe, the West, and international institutions. The study concludes in 2023, limiting the analysis to a period in which key institutional changes and political developments have already occurred and can be examined as a whole. Although Finland's accession to NATO in 2023 and the related security policy changes are highly significant, developments following the membership are not examined in this study, as the long-term effects of NATO membership on Finland's foreign policy, identity, and international position are still unfolding.

Recent debates concerning NATO's unity and the future of transatlantic cooperation further highlight the dynamic nature of the current security environment. Although these developments lie beyond the main scope of this study, some related themes are briefly reflected in the analysis where they emerge in the interview discussions about Finland's evolving security and foreign policy orientation.

1.3 Thesis Outline

This chapter has introduced the research problem, research questions, and the main argument guiding the study. By placing Finland's foreign and security policy within discussions on small-state adaptation, European integration, and geopolitical change, the introduction has presented the core puzzle that drives the

thesis: how Finland's international identity has been redefined between EU accession in 1995 and NATO membership in 2023.

The thesis continues by outlining Finland's historical trajectory, including its Cold War neutrality, the era of Finlandization, and the post-Cold War shift toward the West. A review of existing research on Finnish foreign policy, national identity, and Europeanization follows, highlighting the gaps this study addresses. The theoretical framework brings together small-state theory, Europeanization, and van Ham's work on social power and place branding. The methodology chapter then describes the study's constructivist approach, the single case study design, and the use of thematic analysis on both documents and expert interviews, including reflections on the researcher's position and ethical considerations.

The analysis is structured in two parts. First, it examines the transformation of Finland's international identity across six themes: Western integration, Russia relations, security thinking, role change, international visibility, and pragmatic continuity. The second part discusses the data in relation to the theoretical frameworks of the study, followed by a discussion chapter which situates the empirical findings within the existing scholarship presented in the literature review. The conclusion ties the findings back to the research questions, showing how Finland has gradually moved from a militarily non-aligned small state toward a Western-oriented middle power, and includes reflections on the research process and avenues for future research.

2. Background: Historical Foundation of Finland

To understand contemporary Finland and its political and societal development, it is important to consider its historical background shaped by Swedish and Russian rule, the struggle for independence, and its relationship with Russia.

From approximately the 12th century until 1809, Finland formed part of the Swedish Empire. During this period, Swedish law and administration, Christianity spread and the church played an important role in society, education and administration. Swedish remained the language of governance and education, shaping long-term cultural and institutional development. This era also saw the establishment of key administrative structures, urban centres, and fortifications (Henriksson, et.al. 2023).

In 1809, following the Finnish War (between Sweden and Russia), Finland was annexed into the Russian Empire as an autonomous Grand Duchy. Under the Russian rule, Finland retained its own legal system and institutions, and its autonomy was initially respected. However, during the late 19th century, Russian policies of centralization and Russification reduced Finnish autonomy, creating tensions that contributed to the development of Finnish national consciousness (Spohr, 2024; Henriksson et al., 2023).

Finland declared independence in December 1917 following the collapse of the Russian Empire, which was soon recognised by the Bolshevik government. Independence was soon followed by a civil war in 1918 between White (led by the Finnish Senate, supported by the German Imperial army) and Red (the Finnish People's Delegation) forces. The war ended with White's victory (Spohr, 2024; Henriksson et al., 2023).

The Winter War (1939–1940) was the first of Finland's three wars with the Soviet Union. Following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which placed Finland within the Soviet sphere of influence, the USSR demanded territorial concessions. Finland

refused, and the Soviet Union launched an attack in November 1939. Despite being outnumbered, Finland resisted under difficult winter conditions. The war ended with the Moscow Peace Treaty in March 1940, resulting in significant territorial losses, including parts of Karelia and Vyborg (Tammenlehv  n Perinneliitto, n.d.; Henriksson et al., 2023).

Following the Winter War, Finland sought to recover the lost territories. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Finland entered the war alongside Germany and initially regained lost areas, advancing beyond its pre-borders. As Germany's defeat became evident in 1943, the Soviet launched counteroffensives forcing Finland to retreat. The war ended in September 1944 with a peace settlement that preserved Finland's independence but resulted in territorial losses in the east and substantial war reparations (Henriksson et al., 2023). The Lapland War followed the 1944 armistice between Finland and the USSR, which required Finland to expel German forces from its territory. As German troops withdrew towards Norway, they used scorched-earth tactics, causing extensive destruction in northern Finland. Although fought against Germany, the war was a consequence of Soviet armistice terms and has left a complex legacy in Finland (Seitsonen and Herva, 2017).

After the Second World War, Finland underwent rapid reconstruction and economic transformation. Although it had lost territory and had to pay substantial reparations, these obligations contributed to early industrial development, particularly in the metal and shipbuilding sectors. From the 1950s onward, Finland also developed into a Nordic welfare state, expanding social security, education, and healthcare systems (Henriksson et al., 2023).

During the Cold War, Finland pursued a policy of pragmatic neutrality, maintaining stable relations with the Soviet Union while preserving its democratic system, market economy, and military non-alignment. This enabled cooperation with both Eastern and Western blocs and supported Finland's independence and economic development (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi, 2016). The approach is often described as Finlandization, referring to a smaller state adapting its foreign policy to a more powerful neighbour in order to safeguard its sovereignty. In

Finland, this policy was shaped by the 1948 YYA Treaty and the Paasikivi–Kekkonen line, which prioritized stable relations with the Soviet Union while maintaining domestic democratic and economic structures (Aunesluoma and Rainio-Niemi, 2016; Arter, 2023; Forsberg and Pesu, 2016). Finlandization has also been associated with domestic effects such as self-censorship and cautious public discourse on the Soviet Union, although the concept is contested: some scholars view it as an overly critical external label, while others interpret it as pragmatic accommodation under asymmetric power relations (Quester, 1990; Lanko, 2021; Majander, 1999; Maude, 1982; Moisio, 2008; Singleton, 1981; Forsberg and Pesu, 2016).

In post-Cold War discourse, Finlandization has become a contested analytical concept used to reassess Finland's Cold War legacy and its current geopolitical position between Russia and the Western institutions. The related idea of re-Finlandization has been used to criticize perceived caution in Finland's post-2000 Russia policy, particularly regarding energy and security cooperation. As a result, Finlandization continues to function both as a critical label and as a framework for understanding continuity and change in Finnish foreign and security policy (Forsberg and Pesu, 2016; Arter, 2023; Moisio, 2008).

Finland's post-Cold War security policy combined military non-alignment with a "NATO option," meaning it was not a member but retained the political possibility of joining if its security environment changed. Reflecting a flexible strategy that enabled cooperation with NATO while maintaining formal non-alignment (Forsberg and Christiansson, 2025; Pesu and Iso-Markku, 2024). While membership was long considered largely theoretical, Russia's actions after 2022 shifted this assessment and exposed the limits of deterrence under non-alignment, ultimately leading to Finland's accession process (Pesu and Iso-Markku, 2024).

3. Literature review: Identity and Adaptation in Finnish Foreign Policy

Finnish foreign policy has generated a substantial body of scholarly work, particularly given the country's position as a small state embedded in shifting geopolitical structures. This literature review adopts a thematic and critical approach to synthesising this research (Foster et. al, 2014). The focus is on three overlapping debates: identity as a foundation of foreign policy, post-Cold War continuity and change, and the processes of Europeanization. The review is situated within a constructivist research tradition, reflecting the field's strong emphasis on conceptual and discursive explanations of state behaviour.

3.1 Identity in IR and Foreign Policy

Within the field of IR, identity is recognized as a fundamental concept for interpreting how states perceive their roles and interests. Constructivist scholars suggest that national identities are not inherent or static; rather, they are social products developed through ongoing interactions, shared norms, and political discourse. Alexander Wendt (1992) argues that a state's interests are derived from its identities, which he defines as stable, role-based self-understandings. From this perspective, material factors like military power or geography lack intrinsic meaning until they are interpreted through a social lens (Wendt, 1999).

The influence of identity on foreign policy is often explained through the logic of appropriateness. Instead of making choices based solely on a calculation of costs and benefits, decision-makers are guided by a sense of what is legitimate and expected for a state in their position (March and Olsen, 2011). From this perspective, foreign policy can be seen as the enactment of roles that reflect a state's identity and its perceived place in the international system. Identity is also closely connected to the roles states adopt in international politics. Kalevi J. Holsti (1970) introduced the concept of national role conceptions, referring to policymakers' understandings of the appropriate roles and responsibilities of their

state in international affairs. These role conceptions shape how states interpret their international position and guide foreign policy behaviour.

Furthermore, identity is a product of domestic societal processes rather than just international pressure. Ted Hopf (2002) posits that leaders operate within social-cognitive structures that are unique to their own societies. These internal discursive frameworks determine the boundaries of political imagination, shaping how a state identifies both itself and its external counterparts. Additionally, Anne Clunan (2009) introduces the idea of aspirational constructivism, suggesting that national identity is a site of constant internal competition. In this view, various elites promote different self-images as a way to manage the nation's collective self-esteem and its standing in the global hierarchy.

For analytical purposes, this body of research indicates that national identity is built upon three primary pillars: worldview (the cognitive framework used to interpret global events), political purpose (the core values that drive policy goals), and international status (the state's perceived rank relative to its peers) (Abdedal et al. 2006; Clunan 2009). Together, these perspectives highlight how identity shapes the ways in which states understand their international role and respond to changing geopolitical conditions.

3.2 The Primacy of Finnish National Identity in Explaining Foreign Policy

The literature on Finnish foreign policy is predominantly grounded in analyses of national identity rather than a distinct concept of international identity. In this sense, most studies focus on how Finland understands itself as a state and political community, while also recognizing that this understanding is continuously shaped in relation to external actors such as the EU, the West, and Russia. Identity is therefore not treated as purely internal or external, but as nationally anchored while being relationally constructed through international positioning.

Building on this, a central strand of Finnish foreign policy research conceptualises national identity as a key explanatory factor of foreign policy behaviour. From

this perspective, foreign policy is not only shaped by material interests or institutional constraints, but is also embedded in how the state defines its role and position within the international system. Christopher S. Browning (2002; 2008) has been a key figure in the study of Finnish identity. He has shown how, especially since the end of the Cold War, the narrative of Westernization has become more prominent in Finnish identity discourse, in which Finland is seen as returning to its natural Western reference group. According to Browning (2002), however, this does not mean a complete break with the past, but rather a new interpretation of previous identity stratifications.

According to Teija Tiilikainen (1998; 2006), Finland's political identity is built on the interaction of continuity and change. Historically, Finland has emerged as a border country between East and West, which has strengthened a state-centric, security-oriented and pragmatic foreign policy. Before EU membership, this was particularly evident as a small-state entity, with an emphasis on adapting to tensions between great powers, neutrality and a realistic foreign policy focused on survival. This identity has historically been layered from the administrative and Lutheran tradition of the Swedish period, the period of Russian autonomy and the neutrality policy of the Cold War (Tiilikainen, 1998).

The early 1990s marked a significant turning point in Finnish foreign policy. According to Pesu (2017), the previously relatively coherent Cold War-era small-state realist framework fragmented into several competing foreign policy schools of thought. These perspectives emphasized, on the one hand, a realist view of Russia's enduring importance and the constraints of geography, and on the other hand, a Euro-Atlantic orientation and pro-EU integration thinking. In addition, according to Marco Siddi (2017), the relationship between Finland and Russia is central to the construction of Finnish identity. Russia has historically functioned as a significant "Other" through which Finnishness has been defined and redefined across different historical periods. This highlights the relational nature of identity: national identity is not fixed or internally given, but is continuously constructed in relation to significant external actors. Furthermore, a more globalist perspective emerged, highlighting new transnational threats such as environmental issues and human rights. Through these competing tensions,

Finland's identity began to shift away from a neutrality-based survival strategy towards a more active form of European international agency (Pesu, 2017).

A key finding across multiple studies is the long-standing aspiration toward Westernization. Browning's (2002; 2006) work on the post-Cold War Westernization and the re-evaluation of Finland's small-state identity, highlight that Finland's identity during the Cold War was built on smallness, pragmatic adaptation, and neutrality.

This identity lens has been applied to specific policy domains. For instance, Tiilikainen (1998, 2006) and Palosaari (2013) have examined how Finland adapted its state-centric, small-state self-image to the demands of EU membership, with Palosaari coining the term "small-EU-member-stateness." In the context of the NATO debate, Tuomas Forsberg (2016) demonstrates that both supporters and opponents frame their arguments through competing identity interpretations, either consolidating a Western identity or preserving autonomy and non-alignment.

3.3 Change or Continuity: The Post-Cold War Transition

A second major debate concerns the degree of change the end of the Cold War wrought on Finnish foreign policy's ideational foundations. While a clear shift occurred, most notably, EU membership, scholars largely agree there was no radical break. Instead, they describe a process of adaptation and the fulfillment of long-held aspirations.

On the continuity side, Tiilikainen (1998) argues that the swift turn toward Europe was made "in the spirit of the old realist world-view," prioritizing state security above all. Jaakko Blomberg (2011) echoes this, contending that the underlying values and political culture remained almost unchanged, with the new era merely allowing Finland to finally align its policy with pre-existing societal values. Henrikki Heikka (2005) places this in an even longer continuum, arguing that the

1990s return to the West was a manifestation of a centuries-old republican strategic culture aimed at defending an anti-hegemonic European order.

Others emphasize a more significant, albeit not revolutionary, transformation. Juha Jokela (2010) highlights the speed of discursive change, noting that the former neutrality discourse was rapidly replaced by one emphasizing alignment with the West, the EU, and even NATO. Browning (2008) describes the period as formative, where the collapse of bipolarity allowed a dominant Westernizing narrative to emerge, depicting EU membership as Finland finally "coming home" to its rightful community. Despite these differing emphases, a common denominator is the theme of Westernization as an unfulfilled aspiration finally realized, rather than a sudden ideological revolution.

3.4 Mechanisms of Adaptation: Europeanization

The literature also examines the transformation of Finnish foreign policy through the lens of Europeanization. Palosaari (2011; 2016) distinguishes between "thin" institutional and "thick" social Europeanization, showing that Finland has moved toward more active engagement, particularly in civilian and military crisis management. At the same time, this development has not been linear; according to Hiski Haukkala and Hanna Ojanen (2011), it is characterized by pendulum swings between deeper EU integration and the persistence of national features. In this context, Palosaari argues that Finland's foreign and security policy identity has changed significantly in the post-Cold War era, shifting from a model based on neutrality and small-state survival strategies toward active European agency.

However, EU membership did not replace the old identity but rather reshaped it (Tiilikainen 2006). Tiilikainen (2006) argues that Finland adopted a dual identity in which realist security thinking coexists with European integration, and small-state status came to be seen not only as a constraint but also as a resource within a rules-based international system. This is reflected in Finland's efforts to position itself at the core of the EU, for example through participation in the eurozone and the development of strong national coordination mechanisms. At the same time, Finland can be seen as having entered a phase of informal alignment,

particularly between 2014 and 2022, in which formal military non-alignment was maintained while cooperation with NATO deepened significantly without binding security guarantees (Pesu and Iso-Markku, 2024).

3.5 Research Gap

While existing scholarship has extensively examined Finnish foreign policy through the lenses of national identity, Europeanization, and small-state adaptation, three interconnected gaps remain. First, the literature tends to prioritize national identity, how Finland understands itself internally, rather than international identity as a dynamic and relational construct shaped through discourse, institutional positioning, and external perceptions. Second, place branding and social power have not been systematically integrated into analyses of Finland's foreign policy identity transformation, despite the country's increasing engagement on the international stage.

Third, although existing research generally highlights continuity and gradual change in Finland's post-Cold War foreign policy, these insights have not been fully synthesized into a single longitudinal framework that explains how different phases of Europeanization, small-state adaptation, and evolving security practices collectively shape Finland's international identity over time. In particular, the trajectory from EU accession to NATO membership has not been fully analyzed as a continuous process of identity rearticulation.

This study addresses these gaps by developing an integrated longitudinal framework that combines small-state theory, Europeanization, and van Ham's place branding to explain how Finland's international identity has been continuously rearticulated from EU accession to NATO membership, drawing on expert interviews and document analysis.

4. Theoretical Framework: Three Lenses on Finland's Transformation

Understanding Finland's transformation from a policy of strategic restraint to a more assertive European and global actor requires a theoretical lens that can capture both the structural constraints faced by small states and the institutional processes that reshape national preferences and identities. This chapter develops a framework based on the concepts of small-state and Europeanization. The former explains how states with limited material capabilities navigate international pressure and seek protective alignments, while the latter clarifies how sustained engagement with supranational structures such as the EU influences domestic political culture, policy practices, and national identity. Together, these three perspectives capture different dimensions of a single process of international identity transformation: structural positioning, institutional adaptation, and discursive external representation.

4.1 What are Small States?

Many definitions of small states are used in academic literature, and no single consensus has been reached. Small states make up a large share of the international system and are therefore an important subject of study in International Relations (IR). However, despite their prevalence and extensive scholarly attention, the concept remains contested and only partially defined (Maass, 2009). One way of defining a small state is through measurable indicators such as population size, surface area, and economic capacity. Traditionally, scholars have applied a strict population threshold of around 1–2 million inhabitants. However, some argue that smallness should instead be understood as a spectrum, where differences between states are gradual rather than divided by arbitrary cut-offs (Randma-Liiv, 2002).

In IR, a small state is typically understood as a sovereign actor with limited material capabilities relative to major or super powers, constraining their ability to unilaterally influence international outcomes and increasing their reliance on

multilateral institutions and alliances. These structural limitations expose them to higher vulnerability within an anarchic international system (Maass, 2009; Randma-Liiv, 2002; Baldacchino, 2014; Michalski, et.al, 2024; Wivel, 2014; Long, 2017; Baldacchino and Wivel, 2020). However, this emphasis on material capacity risks overlooking the importance of statehood as a relational and socially constructed condition (Baldacchino, 2014). Small states are also often conceptualized as a residual category, positioned between great and middle powers within the international system (Maass, 2009).

Within the EU context, the definition of small states remains equally varied, depending on population, resources, influence, and institutional setting. While small states are generally unable to unilaterally reshape EU structures, their influence varies across policy sectors (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006).

Importantly, small-state status is not only a material condition but also a relational position that shapes how states define appropriate roles in international politics and construct their strategic identity over time. Rather than implying passivity, vulnerability is accompanied by strategic calculation, as small states seek security and influence through indirect means such as alliances, institutional membership, and normative cooperation. As the literature has developed, small states are increasingly understood as actors exercising agency within structural constraints in world politics, including through alliance-seeking, multilateral engagement, niche norm entrepreneurship, and strategic diplomatic positioning (Michalski et al., 2024).

4.1.1 Small-State Strategies

Small states adopt a variety of strategies to ensure survival and maintain autonomy within an international system dominated by more powerful actors. A key concept is shelter-seeking, which refers to securing protection and stability through external partnerships that compensate for limited material capabilities. This includes military alliances, economic integration, and participation in international organizations, which provide both security guarantees and access to predictable rules that reduce vulnerability (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017;

Wivel, et.al, 2014). Through such arrangements, small states gain not only security guarantees but also access to predictable rules and norms that help reduce vulnerability in an uncertain international environment (Wivel, 2014). Two forms of shelter are commonly distinguished: hard security shelter (military protection, e.g., NATO) and soft security shelter (political, economic and societal protection, e.g., the EU) (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023; Thorhallsson and Bailes, 2017).

A related strategy is hedging, which involves maintaining multiple political, economic, or security relationships to reduce dependence on a singular actor. This allows small states to preserve flexibility in their foreign policy and avoid overcommitment while adapting to changing geopolitical conditions (Kuik, 2016). Small states may also engage in balancing by aligning with external powers to counter perceived threats, or by strengthening regional or collective security arrangements. Participation in multilateral institutions is therefore central, as it enables small states to amplify their influence and mitigate structural vulnerabilities (Bailes, et. al, 2014). Beyond material strategies, small states can also exercise influence through norm entrepreneurship and soft power. By leveraging diplomatic expertise, credibility, and a reputation for neutrality or cooperation, small states can shape international agendas and promote specific policy norms (Baldacchino, 2014).

Small states are used in this study to explain how structural constraints shape both Finland's foreign policy behaviour and its international identity. Rather than treating small states as passive actors, the literature emphasises their strategic agency within constraints, particularly through institutional dependence, alliance formation, and normative positioning. In the Finnish case, this framework helps explain how long-term reliance on European and transatlantic institutions has contributed to a gradual redefinition of its international role. Over time, this has involved a shift from a militarily non-aligned small state toward a more Western-oriented middle power increasingly embedded within Euro-Atlantic political and security structures. In this sense, small-state status is not only material but also relational, shaping how states construct their international role and strategic identity over time.

4.2 Europeanization

As with small states, Europeanization is a contested concept for which no single definition exists. Broadly, it refers to the process through which the EU and its institutions reshape political structures, policies, governance practices, and even identities within member states and applicant countries (Dosenrode, 2020; Börzel and Risse, 2003; Radaelli, 2003; Olsen, 2002). It extends beyond regulatory compliance to include the diffusion of norms, institutional practices, and strategic understandings of political actors (Radaelli, 2003).

The concept was formalized by Robert Ladrech in 1994, though its intellectual roots lie in regional integration theories of the 1950s (Dosenrode, 2020). Europeanization can take multiple forms, including downloading, where EU-level pressures shape domestic adaptation; uploading, where member states influence EU decision-making; and cross-loading, where member states share practices and experiences. Other forms include meta-Europeanization, where states collectively shape EU governance, and export Europeanization, where EU rules are applied to candidate countries (Dosenrode, 2020). Scholars emphasize that the key question is not whether Europe matters, but how, to what degree, and through which mechanisms it shapes member states (Börzel and Risse, 2003).

Rather than a purely institutional adjustment process, Europeanization is understood in this study as a long-term mechanism of identity transformation through which states not only adapt to EU policies but also internalize norms and expectations that reshape their international role. It is used to analyse how Finland's engagement with EU structures has contributed to the gradual redefinition of its international identity, particularly in relation to security policy and its Western orientation. In the Finnish case, Europeanization thus captures how institutional adaptation and norm internalization have progressively embedded Finland within the Western political order, reflecting a broader long-term trajectory of Western integration that has also shaped its evolving security policy and international positioning.

4.3 Peter van Ham's Social Power

A third concept utilized in this thesis is social power. According to Peter van Ham (2010), social power is a central form of power in contemporary international politics. It refers to the ability to set norms, values, and standards that other actors consider legitimate and desirable without direct coercion or economic pressure (van Ham, 2010). Unlike traditional forms of power, it is not based on material capabilities but on the construction of meaning and the definition of what constitutes “normal” international behaviour. Social power operates in a discursive and relational context and is continuously produced through interactions between states, institutions, and the media. Key mechanisms include agenda-setting, framing, public diplomacy and reputation management. Through these, actors influence which issues emerge and how they are interpreted in international discourse (ibid, 2010).

At the core of social power is legitimacy, meaning that certain norms and institutions are accepted as legitimate without constant coercion. When power is perceived as legitimate, it is followed through internalized obligation, making social power an effective yet subtle form of power. Legitimacy is thus a key mechanism through which social power is socialized and transformed into accepted leadership (ibid, 2010).

Social power is also closely linked to identity construction in the international system. Norms not only guide state behaviour but also shape perceptions of what kinds of actors states are or are expected to be. Categories such as “responsible state”, “sustainable actor”, or “peacemaker” emerge through social power. Thus, it not only regulates action but also shapes states’ self-understanding and international status (van Ham, 2010).

Place branding represents the practical dimension of social power, referring to the strategic construction and management of a state’s or regional actors' international image and reputation (Van Ham, 2008; Van Ham, 2010). A brand is shaped by the images, expectations and interpretations that external actors attach to the state,

directly affecting its credibility and legitimacy. A strong country brand can enhance the social power of a state by increasing a state's ability to influence without coercion. However, place branding is co-constructed through interaction with other actors, the media, and the international public, and is therefore not fully controllable. (Van Ham, 2008; Van Ham, 2010). The concrete political actions of a state can either strengthen or weaken its brand quickly, which makes social power vulnerable but at the same time dynamic. In a globalized world, a country brand is a key strategic resource, as states compete for attention, investment and normative credibility (Van Ham, 2008; Van Ham, 2010).

In this thesis, social power and place branding are used as theoretical concepts to analyse how Finland's international identity has been constructed and transformed. Social power explains how norms, legitimacy, and discourse shape Finland's positioning in international politics, while place branding helps explain how Finland's external image and reputation have been strategically and interactively constructed in relation to other international actors.

5. Methodology: a Historically Informed Single Case Study

This chapter outlines the methodological design of the study. It first presents the overall research design, followed by the data collection process, analytical methods and concludes with a discussion of the study's ethical considerations.

5.1 Research Design

This thesis adopts a historically informed single case study design to examine the transformation of Finnish international identity from EU accession to NATO membership. Focusing on Finland as a single case enables an in-depth analysis of how historical experiences, evolving threat perceptions, and long-term geopolitical developments have shaped Finnish security policy (Halperin and Heath, 2020). Situating NATO accession within the broader context of Cold War legacies, post-Cold War European integration, and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine allows the study to trace both continuity and change over time. The approach enables the investigation of how Finland gradually shifted from strategic restraint and military non-alignment toward deeper alignment with Western political and security structures, reflecting a broader reorientation of its international identity (Halperin and Heath 2020).

By prioritizing an interpretive and historically grounded analysis rather than large-scale statistical comparison, the study is able to trace causal pathways and examine the mechanisms through which identity transformation and security policy adaptation occurred. Although the findings are not broadly generalizable, the design strengthens internal validity through close attention to the historical and contextual factors shaping Finland's foreign and security policy trajectory over time (Halperin and Heath, 2020).

5.1.1 Ontological and Epistemological Position

This study is guided by a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. Finland's international identity and security policy are understood as socially constructed and shaped by historical, political and geopolitical contexts rather than fixed realities. Finland's shift from EU membership to NATO accession is viewed as the result of changing interpretations of security, national interests and external threats (della Porta and Keating, 2008; Pernecky, 2016).

An interpretivist approach emphasizes understanding how key actors perceive and interpret these developments. Through document analysis and expert interviews, the study examines the meaning and reasoning underpinning Finland's security choices, highlighting how historical experiences and contemporary challenges interact in shaping foreign policy and national identity (della Porta and Keating, 2008; Pernecky, 2016).

5.2 Case Selection: Why Finland?

Finland was selected as a case due to its suitability for examining international identity transformation in a small state context. Historically characterized by strategic restraint and geopolitical balancing between East and West, Finland has undergone a clearly traceable reorientation from EU accession to NATO membership in 2023. This makes it a particularly illustrative case for analyzing how international identity is constructed and redefined in response to changing security environments and institutional alignments. Positioned between Russian and Western spheres of influence, Finland offers analytically rich material for exploring the interaction between external pressures, institutional integration, and domestic foreign policy narratives. The case is further appropriate for engaging constructivist approaches, small states, Europeanization literature, and concepts of social power.

5.3 Methods

This study combines semi-structured expert interviews with qualitative document analysis to examine the transformation of Finland's international identity.

5.3.1 Document analysis

Document analysis is used to examine how Finland's foreign and security policy, as well as its international role, have been articulated in official texts over time. Finland's transition from EU to NATO membership represents a long-term political process requiring a method capable of capturing both historical continuity and changing state narratives. For this reason, the study applies qualitative document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022).

As Bowen (2009) notes, document analysis is a systematic method for reviewing and interpreting written materials in order to identify patterns, meanings, and contextual insights. The method is particularly suitable for analyzing government reports and political speeches that reflect how Finland's security environment and strategic priorities have been framed across different periods (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022).

An important advantage of document analysis is the stability and non-reactive nature of documents. Unlike interviews, documents are not shaped by the research process itself, allowing texts to be analyzed within their original historical context. Making it possible to trace how key concepts and narratives related to Finland's international role and security policy have evolved over time (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). In this study, document analysis supports triangulation by enabling comparison between policy documents and interview data (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). While documents can corroborate findings and provide contextual insight into policy processes, they are not neutral sources but institutionally produced texts that may reflect selective perspectives. Therefore, each document is critically assessed for credibility, authenticity, and context, and interpreted as a political source that both reflects and constructs Finland's international role (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022).

5.3.2 Expert interviews

To complement the document analysis, this study employs semi-structured expert interviews to capture interpretations of Finnish foreign and security policy that are not always visible in official documents. The interviews focus on how changes in

Finland's international identity have been understood by foreign and security policy experts. In qualitative research, interviews are a key method for accessing actors' professional expertise, interpretations, and experiences of the phenomenon under study (Adams, 2015; Harvey, 2011; Aberbach and Rockman, 2002).

The interviews conducted in this study are semi-structured, allowing for systematic examination of key themes in Finnish foreign and security policy while also giving interviewees space to express their own interpretations and expertise. This format avoids restricting responses to predefined answers and allows new perspectives to emerge during the interviews (Adams, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016). In practice, semi-structured interviews follow an open-ended interview guide that ensures coverage of core research themes while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions. This provides comparability across interviews while maintaining the flexibility needed to capture complex political interpretations and experiences (Adams, 2015; Kallio et al., 2016).

5.4 Data collection

The empirical material for this study consists of two main sources: qualitative document material and semi-structured interviews. Combining these sources allows the research to capture both expert perspectives and formal policy narratives related to Finland's foreign and security policy transformation.

5.4.1 Selection of Documents

The documents included in this study were selected based on their relevance to Finland's foreign and security policy development and the transformation of its international identity between 1995 and 2023. The analysis focuses on official policy documents produced by the Finnish government, primarily the Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy (Valtioneuvoston ulko- ja turvallisuuspoliittiset Selonteot), which outline Finland's assessments of the international security environment and its strategic priorities over time.

The selected reports (1995, 2004, 2009, 2016 and 2020) represent key moments in the development of Finland's foreign and security policy in relation to changes in

the international system. They capture Finland's post-Cold War restructuring and EU integration in the early phase (1995, 2004), shifts following the global financial crisis and evolving EU security dynamics (2009), the impact of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent deterioration of the European security order (2016) and the further escalation of insecurity alongside an emphasis on comprehensive security (2020). Together, these documents enable a longitudinal analysis of how Finnish foreign and security policy has been framed in response to major international developments.

In addition, the data includes selected speeches by President Sauli Niinistö, illustrating how Finland's foreign and security policy has been communicated during key moments of change. The New Year's speeches from 2015, 2023, and 2024 were chosen due to their relevance to major geopolitical developments, including Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022), and Finland's accession to NATO (2023). As these speeches are delivered annually on January 1st, the selected years do not directly coincide with the timing of these events.

To further contextualize the developments examined in this study, nine articles from The New York Times (NYT) are used as complementary sources, with particular emphasis on their role in the analysis of social power. The NYT articles selected for this study cover three Finnish leaders, Sanna Marin (2019, 2025), Sauli Niinistö (2022, 2023), and Alexander Stubb (2025), as well as Finland's NATO accession (2023) and its reputation as the world's happiest country (2025). The articles were chosen because they illustrate how Finland's international identity and place branding are constructed in international media discourse across three themes: personification through leadership, security branding through NATO membership, and soft power through happiness.

5.4.2 Interview Procedure

The study employs nine qualitative expert interviews conducted between April and May 2026. The participants were selected based on their academic, professional, or policy-related expertise in international relations, European security, NATO and/or Finnish foreign and security policy. The selection of

participants followed a criterion-based strategy, focusing on individuals with expert knowledge relevant to the research topic (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2017). Participants were identified through publicly available professional information and institutional affiliations. In three cases, limited snowball sampling was used, with additional participants identified within the same institutional context (Darian-Smith and McCarty, 2017).

While participants were initially identified through criterion-based sampling, the final sample was shaped by voluntary participation, as those who agreed to participate ultimately determined its composition. The sample remains appropriate for the study's aims, as it provides relevant and sufficiently diverse perspectives to address the research questions. Participants were recruited via email, either directly or through assistants depending on institutional position and contact availability. The recruitment email is included in Appendix 1, with a translated version in Appendix 2, to ensure transparency of the data collection process.

All interviews were conducted online via video conferencing platforms, Zoom or Microsoft Teams, enabling flexible scheduling and participation despite geographical distance between Finland-based interviewees and myself in Sweden. Conducting the interviews online presented some expected technical challenges, such as occasional connection issues, which were managed without affecting the interviews. The interviews were conducted in Finnish to ensure clarity and allow participants to express their views in their native language, which was also the most natural choice given that both parties were Finnish speakers. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed in full to ensure accuracy.

The interview guide functioned as a flexible framework to structure the interviews and ensure that key themes related to Finland's foreign and security policy transformation were addressed, including historical security orientation, responses to recent geopolitical developments, and shifts in foreign policy identity. It provided a consistent structure across interviews to support comparability, while remaining non-rigid, allowing the order and wording of questions to vary according to the flow of each interview. This enabled participants to elaborate on

issues on their own terms, with follow-up questions used to probe and clarify responses if necessary. The interviews lasted approximately 20-60 minutes, depending on the length of the conversation. The interview guide prepared in Finnish in line with the language of the interview is included in Appendix 3, and a translated version as Appendix 4.

Within the scope of this study, the research design aimed for a minimum of five expert interviews, with nine interviews ultimately being conducted. From the outset, the intention was to maintain a focused and homogeneous sample consisting of experts with relevant knowledge of Finnish foreign and security policy in order to ensure methodological coherence and analytical depth. The selected sample was therefore limited to individuals with academic, diplomatic, or policy-related expertise, allowing for a consistent basis of comparison across interviews.

The experts interviewed for this study include: Antti Kaikkonen; Hiski Haukkala; Teija Tiilikainen; Klaus Korhonen; Matti Pesu; Pekka Toveri; Iro Särkkä and Jukka Salovaara. A more detailed description of the interviewees can be found in Appendix 5. One interviewee opted to remain anonymous and thus will not be identified by name or institutional affiliation. In the analysis, this participant is referred to as Interviewee 5, reflecting the chronological order in which the interviews were conducted. The numbering does not indicate any other characteristics.

Access to high-level experts proved to be time-consuming and, in some cases, limited due to their professional roles and schedules. As a result, more individuals (approximately 20) were contacted than ultimately interviewed. The final sample thus reflects both purposive selection criteria and practical constraints related to access and participation. It remains small by design and does not aim for statistical generalizability, but instead provides in-depth, information-rich insights into expert perspectives on Finland's foreign and security policy transformation.

5.5 Method of Analysis: Thematic

Thematic analysis was chosen as the primary method for analyzing the empirical material, as it provides a flexible and systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Kiger and Varpio, 2020). It allows analysis at both semantic level (explicit statements) and latent level (underlying assumptions and narratives about Finland's identity and strategic choices). Its structured process, familiarization, theme development, coding, review, and reporting, supports rigorous and transparent analysis while preserving the richness of the data, making it well suited for examining the long-term evolution of Finland's foreign and security policy and identity. (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

Although no formal coding scheme was used, the analysis was conducted systematically and transparently. The data was read repeatedly and examined iteratively to identify recurring themes, meanings, and differences across interviews, speeches, policy documents and the NYT articles. Through continuous comparison, themes emerged via interpretive engagement with the material. This approach prioritizes understanding how meanings are constructed rather than quantifying patterns across sources. The following themes emerged inductively from the data: Finland's Western integration and transformation of identity, the transformation of Russia relations, the transformation of security thinking, the transformation of Finland's international role, the growth of Finland's international visibility and profile, and finally, pragmatic continuity in foreign and security policy. This approach prioritizes understanding how meanings are constructed rather than quantifying patterns across sources.

The study adopts more of an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being guided by pre-existing theoretical assumptions. This enables the study to capture the perspectives of the experts, as well as the content of the documents, in a way that highlights how ideas, priorities, and interpretations about Finland's security and international identity

and role have developed over time (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

5.6 Positionality, Limitations and Reflexivity

This study acknowledges the importance of positionality, limitations, and reflexivity in qualitative research. The research design is based on a limited number of expert interviews and document analysis, enabling in-depth interpretive insights into Finland's foreign and security policy transformation, without aiming for statistical generalizability.

Several limitations apply. The study focuses on Finland's post-Cold War security orientation up to NATO membership, making findings context-dependent and not transferable beyond this period. The empirical material consists of expert interviews and publicly available documents, limiting the analysis to expert and institutional perspectives and excluding broader societal viewpoints.. Third, the use of criterion-based and snowball sampling means that participant selection is guided by relevance and access rather than representativeness and interview responses may reflect institutional roles or strategic framing. Conducting the interviews online may have influenced the dynamics of interaction compared to in-person interviews. Furthermore, most of the empirical material is in Finnish, and translation into English may result in some loss of nuance. Any shortcomings resulting from translations will be compensated for by further interpreting the text or quotations.

In terms of positionality, I am Finnish and share the same language and cultural background as the interviewees, while being based in Sweden during the research process. Having lived outside Finland for several years and completed my education at Swedish institutions, I maintain an analytical distance from Finnish institutions and public discourse, alongside cultural and linguistic familiarity. This dual position provides both access to the field, while also requiring awareness of potential shared assumptions within a common national context and maintaining a reflective distance in interpreting the material. Being situated in a foreign

academic environment has also shaped the study's analytical framing, encouraging a more comparative and externally oriented perspective on Finnish international identity. Supervision outside the Finnish academic context has further supported a detached and critically reflective approach.

Finally, the study recognizes that qualitative interview data is co-produced through interaction between researcher and participants and further interpreted through the researcher's analytical lens. To address this, interview questions were designed to be open-ended and non-leading, and the analysis is systematically grounded in both interview material and documentary sources. By acknowledging these limitations and reflecting on the researcher's role, the study aims to maintain transparency and analytical rigor throughout the research process.

5.7 Ethical considerations

This study follows established ethical principles for qualitative research in the social sciences, with particular attention to the ethical considerations involved in conducting interviews with human participants (Israel, 2015; Bos, 2020; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Prior to participation, all interviewees were informed about the purpose of the study, data use, and their rights as participants, including the right to withdraw at any point without consequences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted (Israel, 2015; Bos, 2020).

The consent form followed the standard template provided by the Faculty of Social Sciences at Lund University. The consent form, written in English, clearly outlined the purpose and scope of the study, participation, confidentiality, and data handling procedures. Participants were given time to review and confirm consent. The consent form is included as Appendix 3.

With the permission, the interviews were audio recorded, and video recorded on Zoom/Teams. Recording helps to maintain transparency in the research process and ensures that the analysis is based on an accurate representation of the participants' responses. Consent for recording was included in the written form

and confirmed verbally prior to the start of each interview. Participants were also informed that they could decline to answer any questions (Israel, 2015; Bos, 2020).

Participants were given the option to remain anonymous or be identified in the study. As noted in section 5.4.2, one participant chose anonymity and is referred to as Interviewee 5, all identifying details of the participant have been removed. All other participants consented to be named and linked to their institutional affiliation, which is common in expert interviews where participants speak in a professional role. The study focused on professional expertise and did not collect personal or sensitive information. All interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher and handled in line with Lund University guidelines and the GDPR (Israel, 2015; Bos, 2020).

In addition to interviews, the study uses publicly available documents such as government reports, speeches, and selected media articles. As these contain no personal or sensitive data, they do not raise issues of consent or confidentiality. Ethical considerations instead relate to ensuring accurate, transparent, and responsible use of sources, with attention to avoiding misrepresentation or selective interpretation (Israel, 2015).

5.7.1 Use of Generative AI and Transcription Tools

Generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT and Gemini, were used as supportive tools during the research process. Their use was limited to brainstorming ideas, feedback, and grammar refinement, especially in translations. All analytical decisions, interpretation of data, and final formulations remained the responsibility of the researcher.

The interviews were transcribed using Sunet Scribe, a transcription service for which Lund University has granted institutional access and approval. The transcriptions were subsequently reviewed and manually corrected to ensure accuracy and to remove any errors generated during the automated process. All

transcripts were also carefully checked to ensure that identifying information was handled in accordance with ethical guidelines and participant consent.

6. Analysis: Three Decades of Gradual Change

The analysis is structured in two parts. The first part presents the empirical findings based on interview and document data. These findings are analyzed thematically through five analytical dimensions: identity, security, role, status, and practice. Rather than following a chronological order, this approach examines how Finland's foreign and security policy transformation is articulated across these interconnected dimensions. The second part discusses these findings in relation to the theoretical frameworks of the study, allowing for a clear distinction between empirical analysis and theoretical interpretation.

6.1 Finland's Western Integration and Transformation of Identity

Finland's Western integration and the related transformation of identity can be understood as a long and multilayered process that has unfolded over several decades. Rather than a single moment of change, the data suggests a gradual shift in which Finland's political self-understanding has moved from cautious neutrality toward a more clearly Western-oriented position. EU membership, the deepening relationship with NATO, and eventually full membership can in this sense be seen as steps that have gradually reinforced this trajectory.

6.1.1 Western Identity Before Western Actions

Several interviewees describe Finland as having had a Western identity already during the Cold War, even if this was not fully reflected in foreign policy practice. What emerged from the interviews is a certain tension: Finland often saw itself as part of the West, but geopolitical constraints limited how openly this could be expressed. As Teija Tiilikainen puts it: "Finland was mentally, or perhaps one could say identity-wise, a Western country..." A similar view is expressed by Iro Särkkä, who notes that Finland's identity was in many ways more Western than its actual foreign policy behaviour allowed for. Interviewee number 5 describes a

similar dynamic: “Finland has always wanted to profile itself as a Western and European country, but the conditions for that came from the East.” The issue was therefore not so much about changing Finland’s identity, but rather about changing geopolitical conditions enabling an already existing identity to be gradually expressed through foreign policy.

At the same time, the Soviet Union clearly shaped the boundaries of Finnish foreign policy during the Cold War. The YYA Treaty in particular defined the framework within which Finland had to operate. As Särkkä notes: Whether we wanted it or not, we were in a certain way tied to its [YYA Treaty] conditions and to a special relationship with the Soviet Union.

Still, the interviews also point out that Finland was not entirely passive within this framework. There were attempts to move closer to Western institutions where possible. Examples such as UN membership in 1955 and participation in the CSCE process in the 1970s were often mentioned in this context. However, Interviewee 5 points out that membership in the UN was only possible after Stalin's death in 1953, which highlights how dependent these steps were on broader geopolitical shifts.

Two interviewees also emphasized the importance of defense cooperation between Finland and the US during the 1990s, particularly through the Hornet fighter procurement. Klaus Korhonen described the acquisition of American F-18 Hornet fighter jets as “quite a significant factor for Finland’s foreign policy identity.”

Särkkä, however, interprets this period more cautiously, emphasizing its pragmatic character. According to her, this did not yet represent a clear shift toward an Atlanticist identity, but rather practical security-policy cooperation. The Hornet procurement can be interpreted as a symbolically significant step toward a more Western-oriented security policy, even if the broader identity shift was still incomplete at that stage.

Although the Western orientation was visible much earlier, the EU membership marked a crucial moment: Finland's already existing Western identity became fully institutionalized at the level of foreign policy.

6.1.2 EU Membership as a Turning Point in Identity

The accession to the EU in 1995 appears, based on both interview material and official documents, as a key turning point in the transformation of Finland's identity. The data suggest that this was not merely an economic or foreign policy decision, but a broader identity-political shift in which Finland positioned itself more clearly as part of the West. Interviewee number 5 describes EU membership primarily as a choice of security and values: "It was a security policy choice for Finland, it was a value choice."

A similar interpretation is offered by Teija Tiilikainen and Antti Kaikkonen. According to Tiilikainen, in joining the EU "a side was chosen, that side was the EU, and with that, the West", while Kaikkonen states that Finland moved "more clearly into the Western community". Based on the interviews, EU membership thus appears above all as a moment in which an already existing Western identity could be fully institutionalised at the level of foreign policy.

This identity shift is also clearly reflected in official security and defence policy documents. The 1995 Security Policy Report explicitly breaks with Cold War-era neutrality, stating that:

After the end of the East-West divide, the policy of neutrality pursued by Finland during the Cold War is no longer a viable course of action.
(Valtioneuvosto, 1995; 39)

At the same time, the report emphasizes Finland's membership in "a community of like-minded democratic states" and that EU membership has become part of "Finland's international identity" (Valtioneuvosto, 1995; 6). The change thus appears not only as a shift in security policy, but also as a transformation in how Finland understood its place in the international community.

The 2009 Security and Defence Policy Report continues this development even more strongly. It states that: "Membership in the European Union is a fundamental security policy choice for Finland." (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 69).

Furthermore, the report emphasises that Finland is part of a “close political union” characterized by strong cohesion and a common will to act together (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 69). Notably, EU membership is no longer justified in the same way as in 1995, but instead presented as a self-evident element of Finland’s security policy thinking. This is reflected in the statement: “Membership in the European Union is a central part of Finland’s security policy.” (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 10)

Based on the material, the EU thus appears not only as an economic but also as a deeply security- and identity-political community, even though it is not a military alliance. Former President Sauli Niinistö also highlighted this in his 2015 New Year’s speech, stating that:

Western partnership is one of the pillars of Finland’s security. EU membership is an important security solution for Finland, even if it is not a defence solution. (Niinistö, 2015)

The interviews further suggest that EU membership did not only transform Finland’s external position, but also its self-understanding. Hiski Haukkala describes the change as a shift “from a regional actor” to an “European actor”, while Kaikkonen emphasizes that EU membership strengthened Finnish “identity, self-confidence and international standing”. Tiilikainen highlights the gradual nature of this transformation: Finland entered the EU still shaped by neutrality, but its identity deepened over time into a more integration-oriented and “supranationally aspiring” state. Sauli Niinistö’s statement in 2015: “Russia is well aware that Finland is and will remain part of the West” (Niinistö, 2015) captures this development well. The phrase constructs Western identity as a stable and unquestionable part of Finland’s international position and identity, while also sending a clear signal to Russia in the post-Crimean context.

However, the material also shows that EU membership did not fully resolve the tension between Finland’s identity and its security policy position. Iro Särkkä describes EU membership as enabling Finland’s “Westernization” only “up to a certain point”. The phrase “up to a certain point” is analytically essential, EU membership significantly advanced the process, but it was not its end point.

Finland had moved from neutrality, and the era of Finlandization, to military non-alignment. EU membership resolved much of the tension between Finland's identity and foreign policy position, but it could be seen that military non-alignment left this compatibility partly unfinished.

6.1.3 NATO Membership as the Culmination

Based on the empirical material, NATO membership looks less like a sudden policy choice and more like the end point of a much longer Western shift that had been building for decades. Many interviewees describe NATO symbolically as the “missing piece” that completes the broader process of Western integration. Haukkala refers to former President Martti Ahtisaari: “...this Western identity of Finland still lacked a piece, because we were not NATO members.” In this interpretation, NATO does not represent the construction of a new identity, but rather the completion of an already existing one. Haukkala further notes that with the membership “the basic building blocks of Western identity are now in place,” emphasizing completion rather than transformation. This view is further reinforced by Pekka Toveri, who describes NATO membership as the “final touch” of Western alignment, marking the culmination of a long-standing process.

This interpretation is also supported by Finnish security policy reports, where NATO membership appears for a long time as an open possibility. The 2004 report states that: “applying for membership remains a possibility in Finland’s security and defence policy in the future,” (Valtioneuvosto, 2004; 3, 64).

while the 2009 report strengthens this line by noting that:

Finland cooperates with NATO and maintains the possibility of applying for NATO membership. There are also strong grounds to continue considering Finland’s NATO membership in the future. (Valtioneuvosto, 2009, 79).

The reports from 2016 and 2020 continue along the same logic, maintaining NATO membership as an open option in response to changes in the security environment (Valtioneuvosto, 2016; 26; Valtioneuvosto, 2020; 30). NATO therefore does not appear as a sudden policy shift, but as a long-standing strategic

possibility that became institutionalized within Finnish security policy well before actual membership. The interview data complements this picture by highlighting the gradual development of military and institutional NATO compatibility. Kaikkonen notes that:

NATO interoperability had been developed within the defence administration for a long time, so membership was not such a dramatic leap,

while Pekka Toveri emphasizes that Finland had “for decades carried out extensive preparations,” making the membership practically ready in technical terms. This suggests that NATO membership was not only a political decision, but also the outcome of long-term institutional adaptation in which potential practical obstacles had already been removed.

Although the process was long, all interviewees identify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as the decisive catalyst. It did not create a new direction, but activated an already existing trajectory. Iro Särkkä describes this as requiring “a push, an external shock”, while Matti Pesu agrees that some external trigger would likely have been necessary even under different circumstances. This supports the interpretation that NATO membership was not a change of direction, but rather the locking in of a long-developing trajectory.

President Niinistö’s 2023 New Year’s speech captures the nature of this transformation by stating that “the era of military non-alignment has come to an end.” The statement does not frame the change as an opening but as a conclusion. At the same time, Niinistö emphasizes continuity through Finland’s EU and Nordic membership, suggesting that NATO does not replace earlier identity layers but adds to them (Niinistö, 2023). Finland’s identity thus appears layered, with Nordic, European, and now Atlantic dimensions coexisting rather than replacing one another.

Overall, the empirical material suggests that NATO membership is not a rupture but an institutional completion, characterized by the NATO option, gradual military interoperability and an external shock. In this sense, membership does not

transform Finland's Western identity but renders it fully evident in its military dimension.

6.1.4 Nordicness as an Anchor of Identity

Several interviewees emphasise Nordicness as a foundational element of Finnish identity, a deeper layer upon which later foreign and security policy identities have been constructed. Särkkä articulates this clearly:

We have never wanted to be that Eastern country or part of Eastern Europe, but instead part of the other Nordic countries and the Nordic framework, and from this has emerged as a European orientation...

Nordicness here operates not merely as a geographical reference, but as a long-standing political and normative orientation that situates Finland firmly away from the East and towards a broader Northern and Western belonging. Pesu reinforces this distinction: “We want to be first and foremost a Nordic country, not a fourth Baltic state.”

This differentiation is analytically significant: Nordicness is not a neutral label but a politically meaningful identity choice that demarcates Finland from its immediate eastern and southern neighbourhoods, and signals an aspiration towards a specific type of belonging.

This layered identity is also reflected in official policy documents and presidential rhetoric. The 1995 report (p.5) states that “belonging to the Nordic region and close cooperation with other Nordic countries is a cornerstone of Finnish society.” while the 2020 report describes Nordic cooperation as an “established and important part of Finland’s foreign and security policy.” (Valtioneuvosto, 2020). In President Niinistö’s 2024 speech, this continuity is condensed into the observation that “Nordicness now has momentum.” (Niinistö, 2024). Rather than being displaced by Europeanization or transatlantic integration, Nordic identity emerges as a resilient and even revitalized layer within Finland’s evolving self-understanding.

Taken together, the analysis points to three interrelated mechanisms behind Finland's identity shift. First, the tension between Finland's Western identity and foreign policy actions that existed during the Cold War gradually faded with EU and eventually NATO membership. Second, identity was shaped through institutional socialization, as participation in the EU and later NATO strengthened Finland's Western self-understanding. Third, Finland's identity was constructed in layers: new layers, such as NATO membership, complemented rather than replaced previous ones, like Nordic or EU identity.

6.2 Transforming Russia Relations and Security

The transformation of Finland's relationship with Russia and its broader security thinking is closely connected to the identity transformation discussed in the previous chapter. If Finland's gradual Westernization represented a process through which the country became a more complete version of its perceived self, the transformation of Russia relations and security thinking functioned as the catalyst that ultimately enabled this shift to materialize politically and institutionally. A central finding emerging from the material is that without the transformation in Russian behavior, Finland's Western identity would likely have remained incomplete. Conversely, without decades of gradual Western integration, Finland could not have responded with the same speed and decisiveness.

The post-Cold War period was initially characterized by cautious optimism. Tiilikainen describes how the Russia relationship had "normalized," meaning that Russia became "a fairly normal neighbor for Finland." Similarly, Haukkala explained how Finland pursued "cooperation" and "positive interdependence" with Russia, largely reflecting the broader European mainstream approach toward post-Soviet Russia. The 1995 Report similarly states that Finland had "built its relations with Russia on a new basis of equality and in accordance with the principles of the CSCE" (Valtioneuvosto, 1995; 42).

At this stage, Finland's identity had already become strongly Western, as discussed in the previous section. Consequently, maintaining stable relations with Russia was not viewed as contradictory to Finland's Western identity, but rather as

compatible with broader European political norms. At the same time, however, Pekka Toveri notes that “behind the scenes, the Defence Forces were preparing for the possibility that we might end up in war.”

This contradiction between optimistic public rhetoric and continued military preparedness became a defining feature of the period. Finland publicly emphasized cooperation and normalization while simultaneously recognizing the enduring strategic uncertainty posed by Russia.

The first significant rupture in this framework emerged following the 2008 war in Georgia. Korhonen notes how limited its immediate impact was on Finnish perceptions: “What has always surprised me is how little the war between Russia and Georgia still affected this relationship.” Yet the 2009 report reflected growing concern, stating that Russia's military actions in Georgia demonstrated its operational readiness and capability for rapidly launched operations (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 16). Although the war did not fundamentally transform Finnish policy, it introduced doubts about the long-term stability of the European security order.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 represented a far more significant turning point, even though it still did not immediately result in NATO membership. Instead, Finland entered what could be described as a period of informal alignment. Both Tiilikainen and Särkkä argue that the Russia policy constructed during the 1990s and early 2000s, based on the idea of a “normal” neighboring relationship, effectively collapsed following Russia's actions in Ukraine. Särkkä explains:

When Russia's first war in Ukraine began... we realized that we needed more security from the West. We needed closer partnerships with Western countries.

This search for deeper security partnerships manifested itself concretely through intensified cooperation with NATO. Korhonen describes how Finland, together with Sweden deliberately deepened cooperation with NATO, while Toveri observes:

Before NATO membership, the rest of the world did not really understand our sophisticated nuances of military non-alignment and neutrality.

In practice, Finland increasingly behaved like a Western ally despite lacking formal alliance membership. This created what can be understood as the paradox of informal alignment: Finland moved progressively closer to the West militarily and strategically while simultaneously attempting to preserve functional relations with Russia. President Niinistö's 2015 New Year speech captures this tension: "Russia knows very well that Finland is and will remain part of the West.", while also reminding audiences that "Russia is and will remain Finland's neighbor." (Niinistö, 2015). These two statements together illustrate the balancing logic of the period. Finland's Western identity had become increasingly explicit, yet geography and the practical realities of neighboring Russia still continued to constrain security policy choices. This intermediate phase was also characterized by what Korhonen describes as a "security deficit", an awareness that existing arrangements were insufficient, even though the political will for NATO membership had not yet fully emerged. Finland trained with NATO, acquired interoperable military equipment, expanded intelligence cooperation, and deepened strategic coordination with Western partners. However, Finland's formal status still lagged behind its practical security orientation.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shattered this ambiguity. Interviewees consistently describe it as the decisive external shock that made NATO membership the only credible strategic solution. Haukkala describes how "the entire paradigm collapsed", security could no longer be built together with Russia, but against Russia. He further notes: "Very rarely are there such clear turning points in political relations as February 2022." Särkkä similarly notes that NATO membership became an existential necessity, not merely a political choice. Korhonen captures this transformation through President Niinistö's rhetoric, noting that one of the traditional four pillars of Finnish foreign policy effectively disappeared: the pillar based on stable Finland-Russia relations.

Niinistö's 2023 speech ultimately framed the transition as the end of an entire historical era, he declared unequivocally: "The era of our military non-alignment

has come to an end.” (Niinistö, 2023). With this statement, the long period of neutrality and informal alignment was formally closed. Security could no longer rely primarily on diplomacy or balanced relations with Russia, but through formal alliances and collective military deterrence. By Niinistö’s 2024 New Year speech, this new security logic had become normalized. He stated that “Finland’s security is now protected by many locks.” (Niinistö, 2024).

NATO membership, the DCA agreement, JEF cooperation, and Nordic partnerships were all presented in the interviews as complementary layers of security. At the same time, Niinistö stressed continuity: “We have not grown bigger than ourselves.” (Niinistö, 2024). This observation is analytically important. Finland’s identity itself had not fundamentally changed overnight; rather, the institutional and strategic expression of that identity evolved in response to a transformed security environment. As Interviewee 5 ultimately summarizes: “Russia will remain a long-term threat.”

6.3 Finland's Role and International Visibility

Finland’s transformed international role and the growth of its global visibility are direct consequences of the changes in identity, Russia relations, and security thinking described in previous sections. As Finland has become a full NATO member, its role in international politics has changed fundamentally, and its international profile has risen unprecedentedly. The key observation is that role change and increased visibility go hand in hand: a new role brings visibility, and increased visibility enables a new kind of role.

6.3.1 Role Change: From a Bridge Builder to Western Outpost

Interviewees widely agree that the traditional image of Finland as a bridge builder between East and West has significantly weakened. Haukkala states: “I don’t believe that Finland can return to that role. We are clearly part of NATO, part of this Western community.” Finland is no longer positioned in an intermediate space

but is clearly anchored in the Western security order. However, Kaikkonen distinguishes between bridge-building and mediation:

We can certainly act as a bridge-builder. As a mediator, perhaps not as effectively as we once did, as our NATO membership dictates our stance..

This distinction is analytically central: bridge-building can be exercised from within Western alignment, whereas mediation requires acceptance from both sides, and any bridge-building role must ultimately align with Finland's own interests, as pointed out by interviewees. NATO membership has particularly weakened this role from Russia's perspective. Toveri describes Finland's new role bluntly:

We have built our own agency and even our own image around this kind of hard power... Now we are more of a Western outpost, armed to the teeth, truly militarily strong and credible.

This expression "western outpost", describes the change well: Finland no longer sees itself as a bridge between two worlds but as part of the Western defense line. Toveri adds that Finland is no longer a bystander in decisions but a decision-maker itself: "Now, at long last, we are finally deciding together on the issues that concern our defense.." Korhonen confirms this new position and role:

In NATO, Finland has quite a strong reputation, at least now as an expert. I've always said that Finland isn't a small country in NATO, Finland is at least a medium-sized country, and that's how we're treated.

This perception captures Finland's new status as something beyond a traditional small state. Tiilikainen situates the shift historically, noting that EU membership already marked a departure from the mediator role as Finland committed fully to European integration and collective decision-making. She adds:

Yes, we are on the same path as an actor, even though we see ourselves as a small state, but in international cooperation we are clearly seeking, should we say, a greater role.

Särkkä highlights a limitation in this: “Finland is no longer non-aligned...we are not neutral...we are not necessarily wanted in such a [mediator] role anymore ...” This is particularly relevant in conflicts involving Russia. She adds: “Finland can continue to act as a bridge builder, a mediator, but... in what contexts and between whom?.” In Niinistö’s 2023 speech, the new role is summarized as: “We receive security from others, we give security to others..” (Niinistö, 2023).

In summary, Finland's role has changed from a traditional bridge builder to a “western outpost”, a credible, militarily strong NATO member that remains Nordic and European, reflecting pragmatic continuity rather than ideological rupture.

6.3.2 Increased International Visibility and Profile

The change in role has been accompanied by a substantial increase in Finland’s international visibility. Kaikkonen states that “Finland's reputation is now at a higher level in 2026 than it has ever been in history.”

Korhonen links the shift to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Finland’s NATO accession, describing an explosive rise in international interest in Finland. He argues Finland is now far better known globally, while outdated stereotypes, such as jokes about polar bears roaming the country, have declined. Pesu describes Finland’s rising international profile through a new expert role, arguing that its security and defence discourse is increasingly taken seriously due to its perceived experience and competence. This reflects a broader shift where Finland’s visibility stems not only from external interest but also by the emergence of a strong international security brand. Toveri describes this brand as a comprehensive model of total defence, resilience, and societal preparedness, unusually strong for a small state, which is internationally recognized. However, he also emphasizes its ambivalence, noting that it can create excessive hype and unrealistic expectations about Finland’s capabilities.

Särkkä complements this by stressing that Finland's security profile has emerged both through external demand and active self-branding, partly externally encouraged. She highlights comprehensive security as an exportable model that integrates society into security production and enhances Finland's international attractiveness. This visibility is further reinforced through institutions, as NATO membership has increased Finland's presence within the alliance, where meetings function not only as decision-making forums but also as arenas of influence.

Finland's growing profile is also increasingly personalized. Särkkä, Haukkala, and Toveri highlight President Alexander Stubb's role in networking and informal bridge-building, particularly with U.S. leadership, strengthening Finland's presence in international security networks. Toveri describes this networking as a concrete mechanism for opening doors globally. Korhonen situates this within a broader leadership dynamic, noting that both Stubb and Niinistö have shaped Finland's international profile with different emphases and leadership styles. He also mentions Prime Minister Sanna Marin, who represented a clearly different and previously unseen profile of Finnish political leadership, further enhancing Finland's international visibility.

Taken together, the change in role and the increase in visibility are not isolated phenomena but directly linked to the transformation of identity. Interviewee 5 states:

Finland is a reliable country. Finland is a country that invests in defense, security. Finland defends international law... These things have not changed.

In other words, the core of Finland's identity has remained, but its manifestations have changed, and this is precisely what makes Finland a credible actor in its new role. Haukkala, however, points out that as a result, Finland's foreign policy agenda has narrowed; the focus is more on hard power, while issues such as climate change and human rights receive less attention. In his 2024 New Year's speech, Niinistö emphasizes that "we have not grown larger than ourselves." (Niinistö, 2024). Finland is still the same country, but it is now more visible and its role is clearer

6.4 Pragmatic Continuity in Foreign and Security Policy

A key theme across the interview material is that Finland's foreign and security policy has undergone both significant change and deep continuity simultaneously. While major transformations have occurred, the underlying logic guiding foreign policy remains remarkably stable. In the interviewees' interpretations, this is not a break in foreign policy orientation, but an adaptation within a longer pragmatic continuum shaped by geopolitical vulnerability, strategic flexibility, and prioritization of national survival.

Särkkä refers to the Paasikivi line, the Cold War-era doctrine emphasizing recognition of geopolitical facts and adaptation to the constraints set by the USSR. She summarizes this as "The Paasikivi line in Finnish foreign policy still more or less rules; recognizing facts is the mother of all wisdom."

This is a significant observation: the strategic culture of the Cold War has persisted, even though its context has changed fundamentally. Other interviewees express similar ideas through concepts such as "survival-driven realism," "strategic DNA," and "relentless pragmatism." What unites these views is the idea that Finnish foreign and security policy has historically been guided less by ideological consistency and more by an ability to adapt to changing geopolitical conditions.

Pragmatic continuity is particularly evident in how international institutions are perceived. Rather than expressions of identity or norms, they are seen as strategic tools to maximise security and manoeuvrability. Salovaara describes the YYA Treaty as an "instrument and tactic" to reduce Soviet pressure. He also notes a similar logic in the EU's mutual assistance clause, where its deterrence effect was emphasized despite known limitations as it was seen as strategically useful against Russia. This indicates continuity in strategic thinking, not specific policy content. Although institutions change, the core objective remains, safeguarding autonomy and strengthening security under geopolitical constraints.

The interviews emphasise the primacy of national interest and strategic agility. Interviewee 5 describes NATO membership as a “continuation of an assumed trajectory,” shaped by a narrowing of options in a changing international environment. Similarly, Salovaara views Finland’s EU accession after the USSR’s collapse as reflecting political flexibility and swift adaptation to changing circumstances. In his view, the same pattern was repeated in the NATO process. Overall, Finnish foreign policy is not passive neutrality or rigid principle-based conduct, but as an ability to rapidly adjust to shifting geopolitical realities.

In addition, Salovaara highlights the existence of consensus underlying foreign policy decisions. He describes these as “unspoken truths” and “elements of group intelligence,” where political actors share a common strategic understanding without explicitly articulating it publicly. EU membership was justified mainly through economic arguments, despite its widely recognized security dimension. A similar dynamic characterized the NATO process, where consensus on membership emerged before leading politicians publicly expressed support. This reflects a political culture shaped by historical uncertainty, proximity to Russia, and the need to construct foreign and security policy consensus cautiously.

However, pragmatic continuity does not imply absence of change. Rather, continuity itself enables change. Many interviewees describe Finland’s Western integration as a gradual process built over decades. From this perspective, NATO membership is not an abrupt rupture but the institutional culmination of a longer strategic reorientation. While Russia’s 2022 invasion accelerated the process, the foundations had been in place long before.

6.5 Finland as a Small State in Transformation

This section analyses empirical data in relation to small states, focusing on sheltering, hedging, and balancing. It examines, first, how Finland’s foreign policy reflects typical small-state behaviour, and second, what kinds of long-term outcomes this behaviour has produced. In this sense, Finland can be understood both as a case that fits within small state theory and as one that also stretches its assumptions.

6.5.1 Small State Logic in Finnish Foreign Policy

A central assumption of small state theory (see Chapter 4.1) is that small states face structural vulnerability in an anarchic international system (Maass, 2009; Wivel, 2014). In Finland's case, this vulnerability has been particularly strong due to geography. Salovaara and Interviewee 5 note that Finland's location, its eastern neighbour Russia (the USSR during the Cold War) created major constraints. Salovaara emphasises that Finland was never equal to the Soviet Union, a long-standing asymmetry that shaped its foreign policy.

Small states seek political, economic, and military protection to compensate for limited capabilities (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023). The EU membership in 1995 functioned as a form of soft security protection (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023). The 1995 report states that "Membership in the European Union strengthens the foundation of Finland's security." (Valtioneuvosto, 1995).

Salovaara notes that the EU was effectively also a security policy solution, even if this was not openly stated. He also highlights the EU's mutual assistance clause (42.7), as a symbolic form of deterrence towards Russia, though not comparable to NATO's Article 5. Russia's 2022 invasion exposed the limits of this arrangement, prompting Finland to seek hard security guarantees through NATO (Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023). Haukkala summarises this: "NATO membership aimed at military deterrence."

Small states reduce risk by diversifying partnerships rather than relying on one actor (Kuik, 2016). Finland has built a broad network of security cooperation, Toveri describes it as "four layers of assurance": national defence, NATO, the EU, Nordic cooperation (NORDEFECO), and the DCA with the US. Särkkä adds further alliance examples, including JEF cooperation, French-led initiatives, Germany's framework nations concept, FISE cooperation with Sweden and NB8 with the Baltics. The 2016 report sees bilateral and multilateral defence cooperation as central to Finland's security, emphasizing the cooperation with Sweden (Valtioneuvosto, 2016; 20, 23). Toveri summarises the logic: "We have multiple layers of assurance so if something goes wrong, at least some of them, and most likely the majority, will work"

Reflecting a hedging strategy in which Finland avoids reliance on a single structure and instead spreads risk across several arrangements. As discussed in Section 6.4, Finland's pragmatic approach has been consistent over time. It is based on caution, realism, and a focus on what works in practice. Here, this pragmatism is visible in how Finland deliberately builds overlapping security arrangements. The guiding principle remains the same: avoid overdependence on any single actor.

Salovaara's description of Finnish foreign policy as "ultra-pragmatic", never ideologically driven but choosing practical solutions in changing circumstances. During the Cold War this meant the YYA Treaty and Finlandization, after the Soviet collapse EU membership, and in 2022 NATO accession. While the tools have changed, the underlying logic remains: recognizing constraints and adapting accordingly. As President Niinistö stated in 2024, "we have not grown ourselves bigger than we are." (Niinistö, 2024) Finland has built a strong security system while maintaining a modest self-image.

Finnish diplomacy and its mediator role reflect a broader pattern of pragmatic continuity. According to the interviewees, diplomacy has functioned not only as a foreign policy tool but also as a means of maintaining independence and flexibility between major powers. Finland's peacekeeping activities and especially the Helsinki CSCE Conference in 1975 illustrate this mediating position, which also strengthened its international visibility.

This emphasis is also reflected in official Foreign and Security Policy Reports. The 1995 report highlights Finland's role in preventive diplomacy and peaceful conflict resolution (Valtioneuvosto, 1995, 20). The 2016 report identifies mediation and dialogue as an increasing focus, while the 2020 report further strengthens this by emphasising peace mediation and peacebuilding as central to Finland's international role (Valtioneuvosto, 2016; Valtioneuvosto, 2020). Overall, this illustrates a small state strategy of gaining influence through diplomacy and international institutions

Several interviewees also highlight Finland's strong commitment to international institutions, especially in the EU. From the beginning, Finland has supported

strengthening EU institutions. The underlying idea is that strong institutions limit the influence of great powers and increase the security and influence of smaller states. The 2009 report states:

Finland seeks to develop the European Union into a more effective and cohesive actor...Finland's interest lies in a Union that is as efficient and influential as possible in international politics. (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 69).

6.5.2 Finnish Exceptionalism Within Small-State Behaviour

The empirical data also reveals areas where Finland stands out compared to typical small states. Firstly, Finland's national defence distinguishes itself from that of most small states. The interviewees highlight that Finland's conscription system, extensive reserve, and high level of preparedness form a structural foundation, which is also reflected in the official government reports. Finland's national defence is based on territorial defence, general conscription, and a broad reserve (Valtioneuvosto, 1995; Valtioneuvosto 2009). In Niinistö's 2015 speech, this exceptionalism is captured as follows:

Finland, as one of the few European countries, has, even after the Cold War, viewed the possibility of military conflict as a potential threat and maintained the defence capability required for it. (Niinistö, 2015).

Finlandization is described in the data as a survival strategy rather than a protective relationship. Salovaara describes the YYA Treaty as "an instrument and tactic" used to manage pressure from the Soviet Union. He further contrasts Finland with Sweden: "In Sweden, neutrality was historically so long that it became deeply embedded. For us, it was seen as a means of survival." Toveri adds that there was a clear divide between official rhetoric and practical preparedness.

Third, after decades of military non-alignment, Finland joined NATO rapidly in 2023. Such a major security policy shift in a relatively short period is uncommon for a small state with a long tradition of non-alignment. However, the data

suggests that this was not a sudden rupture but the culmination of long-term preparation. Toveri explains how For over twenty years, the defence system had been prepared for NATO membership and all military equipment had to be NATO-compatible. Korhonen adds: “We had participated in several NATO operations... and practically also in Article Five exercises.” Interviewee 5 describes this as a “plus two” situation, where Finland and Sweden were already closely integrated into NATO structures before formal membership. As Toveri concludes: “This was a clear continuation. That’s why NATO membership happened so quickly.”

Fourth, Finland’s international visibility and comprehensive security model are unusually strong for a small state. Salovaara notes how he has never seen Finland in such an influential position. Särkkä highlights the global demand for the Finnish security model, while Salovaara summarizes the development by noting that Finland has turned a potential weakness into a strength and an export product.

Taken together, Finland’s foreign and security policy is largely consistent with small-state behaviour, particularly through strategies of hedging, shelter-seeking, and pragmatic adaptation. However, when examined over time, these strategies have produced cumulative effects that go beyond traditional small state outcomes. Rather than marking a rupture, NATO membership represents the culmination of a long-term process of Western integration and institutional embedding. In this sense, Finland remains a small state in its strategic logic, but increasingly exhibits the structural characteristics of a middle power. Korhonen summarizes this well: “In NATO, Finland is not a small state. Finland is at least a middle-sized state, and we are treated accordingly.”

6.6 Europeanization: Mechanisms and Effects of EU Membership

In this section, the empirical data is examined through Europeanization (see section 4.2) and its five mechanisms: downloading; uploading; cross-loading; meta-Europeanization and export-Europeanization.

6.6.1 Downloading: The Internalization of EU Norms

Downloading is evident in the data, in how Finland has internalized the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as part of its own policy framework. In the 1995 Report, the CFSP is still framed in instrumental terms, as it "provides Finland with a new and strong instrument for pursuing its objectives" (Valtioneuvosto, 1995; 41). At this stage, Finland adopts the EU framework but maintains a strong emphasis on military non-alignment. By 2009, downloading has deepened significantly. The report notes that membership obliges Finland to "engage in issues that previously did not belong to its traditional security policy core" (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 10). EU membership thus not only broadened the policy agenda but also altered its underlying logic. A clear institutional example is the amendment of Finnish legislation in line with the mutual assistance clause (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 63), which ties Finland more closely to the EU security framework.

The most concrete example of downloading is the implementation of EU sanctions. Both Tiilikainen and Interviewee 5 highlight how Finland participated in imposing sanctions on Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. As the interviews suggest, Finland increasingly operated within a European framework in which the EU provided a collective structure for action that Finland committed itself to, as reflected in Niinistö's 2015 statement: "We condemn Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea... We have done this together with the EU" (Niinistö, 2015).

According to the interviews, EU membership is also significant as downloading concerns not only what Finland does, but how it understands itself. Core concepts such as neutrality, peacekeeping, and small state identity have been reinterpreted through a European lens. Finland increasingly frames its security as part of a broader European context, as also stated in the reports:

If security in our neighbouring areas or elsewhere in Europe were threatened, Finland, as an EU member, could not remain outside (Valtioneuvosto, 2020; 10).

6.6.2 Uploading: Finland's Influence on EU Politics

Empirical data indicates that Finland has not been a passive recipient of EU norms but an active agent in shaping EU policy in line with its own regional and strategic priorities. This influence is particularly visible in issues related to Northern Europe, notably the Northern Dimension, Baltic Sea cooperation, and broader Russia-related EU policies.

The 2004 report highlights Finland's role in the development of EU's Russia policy (Valtioneuvosto, 2004, 64). This agenda-setting dimension is most clearly expressed through the Northern Dimension framework, through which Finland has sought to elevate the Baltic Sea region and Russia's neighbouring areas into shared EU-level concerns. As Tiilikainen notes, initiatives such as the Northern Dimension programme and the EU Baltic Sea Strategy illustrate how Finland has actively framed regional neighbourhood issues as matters of common European interest.

Beyond agenda-setting, uploading also operates through strategic framing of EU instruments. Salovaara's account of Article 42.7 illustrates this dimension: Finland did not alter the treaty itself but contributed to shaping its political interpretation, emphasizing its significance despite its operational limitations. This reflects a discursive form of influence, where meaning-making becomes a mechanism of policy impact.

Finland's influence is also exercised through coalition-building, particularly in cooperation with the Nordic and Baltic states. Both the 2004 and 2020 Reports underline the importance of regional cooperation, with Sweden increasingly framed as Finland's closest partner. Rather than seeking unilateral influence, Finland operates through issue-specific coalitions that amplify shared positions within EU negotiations (Valtioneuvosto, 2004; 3; Valtioneuvosto, 2020; 20).

Finally, uploading is supported by a reputational strategy often described in the interview data as a "model pupil" approach. This refers to Finland's emphasis on active participation, compliance with rules, and expert credibility. As Interviewee 5 notes, there was a strong norm of being "the top student in the EU class." This is

consistent with the 2009 framing of Finland as an “active, pragmatic, and solution-oriented member state” (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 20). In this sense, influence is not primarily derived from material power but from credibility, technical expertise, and perceived reliability. Finland’s “good European” profile thus functions as an enabling condition for informal influence within EU decision-making structures.

6.6.3 Meta-Europeanization and Cross-Loading

Meta-Europeanization and cross-loading are closely linked but refer to different levels of Europeanization. Meta-Europeanization describes how EU membership reshapes Finland’s self-understanding within a European security community. Cross-loading refers to the horizontal transfer of security practices, approaches, and strategic thinking between states, particularly among the Nordic countries in Finland’s case (Dosenrode, 2020).

Meta-Europeanization is most evident in the data through the changing role of the EU in Finland’s self-understanding. The 2004 Report describes the EU as a “new type of security community” (Valtioneuvosto, 2004; 59), marking a shift from instrumental integration towards a sense of belonging. The EU is thus no longer perceived merely as a political or economic system, but as a community to which Finland’s security identity is increasingly tied.

In the interviews, this identity shift is clearly visible. Haukkala notes that, with membership, Finland became part of this Western community more strongly than before. At the same time, this change did not replace earlier identity layers. Pesu emphasises that Finland still wants to be primarily a Nordic country. Europeanization therefore appears in the data as a layered process in which European identity developed alongside, rather than replacing the Nordic identity. President Niinistö’s 2024 speech captures this development by stating that Finland’s key foreign policy reference groups are the European Union and the Nordic countries (Niinistö, 2024). The EU thus gradually became part of Finland’s identity, while the Nordic security community remained a central framework

Cross-loading complements this by highlighting how European security thinking is practically constructed through interaction between states. In particular, Nordic cooperation functions as a key horizontal channel. The 2020 Report emphasises the deepening of defence cooperation between Finland and Sweden “without predefined limitations” (Valtioneuvosto, 2020; 20), which reflects an increasingly institutionalized convergence.

The interview material points to the formation of a shared strategic culture. Salovaara describes how, when the war in Ukraine began, the Nordic countries' mindsets were very similar, even without prior coordination. This suggests that long-term cooperation has produced a shared strategic culture where formal coordination is no longer always necessary. Korhonen describes the Nordic countries as a natural reference group for Finland. This is also reflected in multilayered security networks: Toveri refers to NORDEFECO, JEF and other defence frameworks as part of a multi-layered structure where EU membership is only one component of wider Western security integration. Europeanization has thus taken place not only through EU institutions, but also through inter-state learning, cooperation, and gradual interoperability.

6.6.4 Export-Europeanization: Promoting EU Norms Abroad

Export-Europeanization is most visible in the data in Finland's support for EU enlargement and the strengthening of European norms in its neighbouring regions. In the 1995 Report, Finland emphasises its support for the Baltic states in meeting the political and economic criteria for EU membership (Valtioneuvosto, 1995; 15). Later, the same logic was extended to the Western Balkans (Valtioneuvosto, 2009; 94). However, export-Europeanization appears as a clearly less prominent mechanism than the others, suggesting that Finland's Europeanization has primarily been a process of domestic adaptation and identity change rather than an active project of exporting EU norms.

Overall, the findings support the thesis that EU membership forms a key stage in a longer trajectory of gradual Western integration, evolving security practices, and

the continuous rearticulation of Finland's international identity. Rather than representing a discrete shift, EU membership emerges as part of a cumulative process in which Finland increasingly internalized European norms, actively shaped EU policies, and redefined its security identity within both European and Nordic frameworks. In this sense, EU integration constitutes an essential precondition for Finland's later repositioning as a Western-oriented state embedded within broader Euro-Atlantic security structures.

6.7 Building Finland's International Brand

This section analyses the empirical data, primarily interview material and The New York Times articles, in relation to van Ham's concept of social power and place branding (see Section 4.3). The analysis focuses first on the personification of the Finnish brand, followed by Finland as a security brand and credible ally, and finally happiness as a form of soft power.

6.7.1 The Personification of the Finnish Brand

The NYT's way of constructing Finland relies heavily on individual political leaders. Finland does not appear in international media as an abstract state but rather through concrete, recognizable individuals. This process of personification is a key mechanism through which Finland builds its social power (van Ham, 2010): the personalities, narratives, and styles of leaders make a small state visible and legible in international discourse.

Sanna Marin personifies progressiveness and exceptionalism. The December 2019 article constructs her image through youth, female leadership, and an unconventional background, "raised by her mother and her mother's female partner" and "coming from a low-income family", framing Finland as a progressive society of opportunity (Specia, 2019). At this stage, Marin was not merely a prime minister; she effectively became the Finnish brand. The November 2025 article on the dancing video controversy reveals the vulnerability of personalized branding: "That night was, maybe, six hours of my life. I was a

Prime Minister for four years” (Nierenberg, 2025)¹. However, the controversy did not undermine the brand; paradoxically, it increased international visibility.

Sauli Niinistö, in turn, personifies a different image of Finland: stability, experience, and realism. The February 2022 article describes him as an “interpreter between East and West,” a role grounded in decades of experience with Russia. The detail about playing ice hockey with Putin: “I’ve been playing all my life”, constructs an image of a leader who understands the counterpart on a personal level (Horowitz, 2022).

Meanwhile, Alexander Stubb personifies Atlanticism and networking capability. The April 2025 article describes how he played golf with Donald Trump in Palm Beach. His personal background, attending high school in Daytona Beach and receiving a golf scholarship at Furman University in South Carolina, constructs an image of a Finnish leader fully at home in an American context (Sonne, 2025b).

In the interviews, the importance of personification is further reinforced. Most interviewees highlight the visibility of Finnish leaders in international arenas, particularly Sauli Niinistö, Sanna Marin, and Alexander Stubb in recent years. These personifications also correspond to the NYT portrayals: Marin as something new and different, Niinistö as the experienced Russia expert, and Stubb as a networking powerhouse and “Trump whisperer.” As Kaikkonen states “Finland’s international visibility in 2026 is at a higher level than it has ever been in history.”

6.7.2 Security Brand: Finland as a Credible Ally

The security brand is the backbone of the NYT representation of Finland, particularly after 2022. It is constructed through three mutually reinforcing elements: military credibility, strategic readiness, and leader-personified stability.

¹ In the Sanna Marin dancing controversy in August 2022, videos were leaked showing the Prime Minister dancing and singing with her friends at a private party. The incident sparked widespread debate about how freely a Prime Minister may behave in their free time.

Military credibility is built through concrete facts. A March 2023 article emphasizes that “wartime strength can grow quickly to 280,000 forces” and that “Finland’s artillery forces are the largest and best equipped in Western Europe, with some 1,500 artillery weapons, including 700 howitzer guns, 700 heavy mortars, and 100 rocket launcher systems.” These are measurable capabilities, not abstract claims. The article notes, this is “a huge plus for NATO.” Finland is not positioned as a security consumer but as a contributor of added value, a key mechanism of social power (Erlanger, 2023)

Strategic readiness is reflected in how NATO membership is framed. An April 2023 article describes it as a “strategic defeat for President Vladimir V. Putin.” Finland is not constructed as a victim but as an actor making a rational strategic choice. This discourse is further reinforced by Niinistö’s statement: “We are not a sphere.” (Erlanger, 2023) This signals a clear rejection of Finland’s former position within Russia’s perceived sphere of influence.

Leaders personify the security brand. In a September 2023 article, Niinistö warns that there is a serious risk of nuclear weapons being used (Erlanger, 2023). Stubb, in an April 2025 article, states more directly that “The only thing that Putin understands is power.” (Sonne, 2025a). Both articulate the same logic in different registers: realism and strategic capability.

In the interviews, this security brand is further reinforced. As previously stated, Särkkä describes the Finnish security brand as an export product. Korhonen further notes:

In NATO, Finland has quite a strong reputation... Finland isn’t a small country in NATO; Finland is at least a medium-sized country, and that’s how we’re treated.

However, the interviews also introduce critical perspectives. Pesu warns that Finland’s security and defence capabilities are surrounded by “a significant amount of somewhat unfounded international “hype.”

6.7.3 Happiness as Soft Power

Alongside the security brand, the NYT constructs an image of Finland as a site of happiness and wellbeing. These dimensions are not contradictory but complementary: the same state that is a credible ally is also the world's happiest country. The May 2025 article states that "For eight years running, Finland has been rated the happiest country in the world" (Young, 2025). However, the author travels to Helsinki in February, an "objectively weird choice," to test the brand during its darkest hour. The sauna is central as "all government buildings in Finland have a sauna, sauna is not a means to an end" (Young, 2025). This builds a picture of authentic well-being that cannot be bought. In the interviews, the happiness brand is discussed more critically: according to Toveri, Finland is the happiest nation in the world precisely because "a pessimist is never disappointed."

According to van Ham (2010), social power is largely based on legitimacy: when certain norms and institutions are accepted as self-evident without coercion, power can be seen as successfully exercised. In this case, happiness becomes a norm through which the country is evaluated; Finland is described as a happy country and this is repeated so often that it comes to appear as a natural truth. Similarly, from a place branding perspective (van Ham, 2008), happiness functions as a strategic resource that distinguishes Finland from other Nordic and European countries and makes it recognizable. However, it is precisely this combination of a strong security and a soft happiness brand that makes Finland's international image so unique and elevates its visibility beyond that typically associated with small states.

7. Discussion

This chapter compares the key findings of this research with existing literature on Finnish foreign policy, with particular attention to small state theory, Europeanization, and identity scholarship. The aim is to identify both continuities and tensions between empirical findings and established interpretations. The central argument of the thesis is that NATO membership should not be understood as an abrupt rupture, but rather as the culmination of a long historical trajectory in which Finland has gradually transformed from a militarily non-aligned small state into a Western-oriented middle power embedded within Euro-Atlantic political and security structures.

A central point of convergence concerns identity. Both the findings and literature suggest that Finland's Western identity existed long before its full manifestation in foreign policy practice (Browning, 2002; 2008). During the Cold War, Finland understood itself as part of the Western sphere, but the YYA Treaty constrained this identity's translation into policy. The findings confirm this: Western identity was present but structurally constrained. The literature emphasizes that Finland's Western orientation has been consistent, with post-Cold War developments enabling its gradual realization (Tiilikainen, 1998; 2006). This is also evident in the findings, Finland did not fundamentally transform its identity in the 1990s but gained institutional space to act on an existing orientation. EU membership was the first major institutional step, but NATO membership represents the culmination.

The empirical material, however, refines this interpretation by showing that identity change was not only discursive but also deeply embedded in institutional and material practices. Alongside political narratives of Western belonging, Finland gradually constructed practical alignment with Western security structures. This included the acquisition of advanced Western military systems, sustained interoperability with NATO forces, participation in joint exercises, long-term defence cooperation with the US, and the maintenance of a NATO option in official policy documents (Pesu and Iso-Markku, 2024). These

developments demonstrate that Finland did not simply "speak itself" into a Western identity but actively built the material and institutional conditions for belonging.

New elements such as EU and NATO membership did not replace older ones but were added on top of them, consistent with Tiilikainen (1998; 2006) and Browning (2002; 2008). Nordic identity remained foundational while European and Atlantic dimensions were progressively integrated. NATO membership is thus best understood as a "final seal" in a long accumulation process rather than a decisive break. This layered structure explains why the transformation was perceived domestically as natural: it had been prepared over decades. The transformation was also both structural and lived. Finally, the transformation is irreversible: Finland has clearly positioned itself within Western structures, making a return to Cold War-style neutrality highly unlikely.

A major analytical tension in the literature concerns continuity versus change (Tiilikainen, 1998; Browning, 2008; Forsberg, 2016). The findings suggest that continuity and change operate simultaneously, but at different levels. At the level of strategic logic, Finnish foreign policy demonstrates strong continuity through pragmatic adaptation to external constraints or "ultra-pragmatism" (Forsberg, 2016). At the level of institutional positioning, change is profound. The literature does not always distinguish these levels, obscuring how deep continuity coexists with substantial transformation.

Small states provide a useful framework for understanding this behaviour. The findings confirm that Finland has consistently engaged in shelter-seeking across different phases: the Cold War YYA framework, EU membership, and NATO accession (Thorhallsson and Bailes, 2017; Thorhallsson and Stude Vidal, 2023). Hedging behaviour is evident in Finland's participation in overlapping structures including Nordic cooperation, EU frameworks, NATO partnerships, and bilateral agreements with the US (Kuik, 2016). However, the findings also extend the limits of small state theory. While the theory explains adaptive behaviour well, it struggles to capture the gradual transformation in international status. Finland's repeated adaptation has increased its credibility and strategic relevance, within

NATO, Finland is increasingly perceived not merely as a small state but as a medium-sized member, suggesting movement along a small to middle power continuum.

Regarding Europeanization, the findings both confirm and clarify existing interpretations (Palosaari, 2011, 2013; Haukkala and Ojanen, 2011). The EU membership clearly represents a major transformation in Finland's identity, anchoring it within the European political order and shifting it from neutrality toward active European agency. Yet Europeanization alone does not fully account for Finland's security trajectory. Military non-alignment persisted long after EU accession, and EU mutual defence commitments were not considered sufficient in practice. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exposed the limits of EU security arrangements.

Finally, the findings highlight the importance of non-material dimensions of international positioning (van Ham, 2008, 2010). Finland has successfully constructed an international profile that functions as strategic branding, combining its reputation as a capable and reliable security actor, a high-trust societal model, and an image of resilience and crisis preparedness. This reputational dimension enhances Finland's influence beyond what its material size would suggest. In addition, political leadership has played a role in personifying different phases of this identity transformation, reinforcing Finland's visibility in international politics.

8. Conclusion

This thesis sought to answer the following research question:

How and to what extent has Finland's international identity been redefined between EU accession in 1995 and NATO membership in 2023?

More specifically, it examined: How Finnish international identity was articulated in political discourse; How Europeanization shaped Finland's foreign and security policy identity; How Finland navigated geopolitical pressures as a small state and How social power and place branding contributed to the transformation of its international position.

This thesis has shown that Finland's international identity has been significantly redefined over the three decades, but in a cumulative rather than transformative way. Finland has not become something fundamentally different; rather, it has become a more complete and unambiguous version of what it already was. The identity change is therefore best understood as a gradual process of completion rather than rupture.

In terms of political discourse, Finnish international identity has been consistently framed through a narrative of Western belonging that has become progressively more explicit over time. The 1995 Security Policy Report marked a clear departure from Cold War neutrality, while the 2009 report framed EU membership as a natural element of Finnish security policy. President Niinistö's 2015 statement that "Russia knows very well that Finland is and will remain part of the West" placed Finland unequivocally among the West. NATO membership formalized this trajectory, presenting itself not as a break but as the logical endpoint of a long-standing orientation. Across this period, Nordic identity remained a stable foundation, while European and later Atlantic dimensions were gradually layered onto it.

Europeanization played a central role in reshaping Finland's identity, but it was not sufficient on its own to complete the transformation. EU membership anchored Finland politically and institutionally within the European order and

shifted its self-understanding from neutrality toward active participation in the Western community. It also embedded norms and practices that influenced everyday foreign policy behaviour. However, Europeanization did not resolve the security dimension of Finland's identity. Military non-alignment persisted, and the EU framework was not perceived as providing sufficient defence guarantees. As a result, Finland's Western identity remained incomplete until NATO membership aligned its political, institutional, and military dimensions.

Finland's response to geopolitical pressures, particularly in relation to Russia, has been characterized by pragmatic adaptation rather than ideological consistency. Finland has used strategies of shelter-seeking and hedging to manage vulnerability while preserving autonomy. During the Cold War, this took the form of balancing through the YYA Treaty framework. After EU accession, Finland maintained strategic flexibility through the NATO option while deepening interoperability with Western partners. After 2014, Finland moved closer to informal alignment with NATO and key allies without formal membership. Throughout these shifts, the underlying logic remained stable: adapt to constraints, diversify dependencies, and avoid overreliance on any single actor. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 did not change this strategic logic but removed the viability of non-alignment, accelerating an already existing trajectory.

Social power and place branding have supported this transformation by strengthening Finland's international visibility and credibility. Finland has developed a strong external image centred on resilience, high institutional trust, security expertise, and comprehensive defence capabilities. This has been reinforced by political leadership and global narratives which have made Finland into a reliable security actor. While this has increased Finland's influence and visibility, it has not created a new identity. Instead, it has amplified an already existing one, it just made Finland's capabilities more known internationally.

Taken together, these findings support the main argument of this thesis: Finland has moved from a militarily non-aligned small state toward a Western-oriented actor that increasingly functions as a middle power within Euro-Atlantic structures. While Finland remains a small state in material terms, due to its population size, economic scale, and geographic position, its functional role in

international politics has changed significantly. It is no longer defined mainly by vulnerability or passive adaptation, but is increasingly recognised as a capable and credible contributor with influence that goes beyond its size, especially within NATO and broader Western security cooperation.

The significance of this shift is that Finland's international identity has become more stable and clearly defined over the period of 1995–2023. Earlier ambiguity linked to neutrality and military non-alignment has largely disappeared, as Finland is now firmly embedded in Western political, institutional, and military frameworks. What has changed most is not Finland's material capacity, but its role, status, and position within the international system.

This transformation also challenges common assumptions in small state theory. Small states are often seen as actors that must adapt to external pressures and accept conditions set by others. Finland, however, a characteristic more typical of a middle power than a traditional small state, has increasingly shaped its own strategic position by actively managing these constraints rather than simply reacting to them. In this sense, it has not only adapted to the international system but also helped define its own role within it.

8.2 Reflections and Future Research

This research deepened my understanding of Finland's Western integration and how security policy links to identity and history. I initially viewed NATO membership as a response to Russia's 2022 invasion, but it became clear it reflects a longer process of Western integration and identity change.

Writing the thesis also taught me how strongly theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices shape what a study ultimately observes and concludes. Initially, I approached the topic from the perspective of Finlandization and the Russian threat, but through supervision and the research process, the focus gradually shifted toward a more personally engaging and academically meaningful direction.

From the start, I knew that small state theory would form one of the central theoretical frameworks. I did also consider securitization theory, ontological security, strategic culture, liberal institutionalism, and framing theory. While each could have offered valuable insights, they would have led the research to different questions and interpretations. The research showed that theoretical choices are not neutral, as they shape both the questions asked and the conclusions drawn. The process also highlighted the importance of methodological choices. I considered content and discourse analysis, but combining interviews with document analysis allowed me to examine both official narratives and expert interpretations. Discourse analysis would have focused more on language construction, while content analysis could have enabled broader thematic coverage but with less interpretive depth.

In addition, the study taught me a great deal about interviews as a research method. I had never previously conducted interviews, let alone expert interviews, so the process initially felt intimidating. However, as the interviews progressed, I noticed a significant improvement in both my confidence and interviewing skills. Although conducting the interviews face-to-face would have been ideal, remote interviews nevertheless provided a flexible and effective way of gathering material. Overall, the research process reinforced my understanding that every decision made in a study, from defining the topic to selecting theories and methods, shape what the research ultimately becomes. Looking back, I feel that the theoretical and methodological choices made throughout the thesis supported the aims of the study well and formed a coherent whole.

This study opens up several avenues for future research, highlighting both the scope and the timeliness of the topic. Although this study focuses on Finland's international identity transformation from 1995 to 2023, it shows that this process does not end with NATO membership but continues to evolve in a changing security environment. The full implications of membership for identity, decision-making, and international role are likely to become fully visible only over a longer time horizon. Future research could therefore adopt a longitudinal approach to examine how these developments unfold as the practical implications of the membership become more concrete.

A comparative research on small states could further deepen understanding of identity transformation. A key avenue would be comparing Finland and Sweden's NATO accessions, not only in procedural terms but also on the kinds of members they have become and how these outcomes are shaped by history, strategic culture, and identity formation. The Baltic states would add a valuable longitudinal and geopolitical dimension due to their earlier accession under different geopolitical conditions. This comparative perspective could be extended to the Nordic region, where differing trajectories in European integration and security policy offer a useful framework for analyzing divergent identity developments. Finally, several related themes were outside the scope of this thesis that could be further researched, including the role of media, public opinion, and political actors in shaping identity. Social power and place branding could also be explored further, especially in how states build their international position through soft power.

Together, these directions highlight the need for further research that both deepens and expands the findings presented in this study. Therefore, the topic offers a strong foundation for more extensive scholarly work, such as a doctoral dissertation, which would enable the examination of identity change over a longer period of time, with richer empirical data and a deeper theoretical approach.

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Appendix 1: Interview Email in Finnish

Interview email in Finnish

Aihe: Haastattelupyyntö pro gradu -tutkielmaa varten

Hei!

Lähestyn teitä kysyäkseen, olisiko mahdollista sopia haastatteluaikaa XXXXX kanssa / Lähestyn teitä kysyäkseen, olisiko mahdollista sopia haastatteluaikaa kanssanne.

Nimeni on Assi Rahiala ja opiskelen Global Studies -maisteriohjelmassa Lundin yliopistossa. Kirjoitan parhaillaan pro gradu -tutkielmaani Suomen kansainvälisen identiteetin muutoksesta EU-jäsenyydestä NATO-jäsenyyteen, sekä siitä, miten Suomen rooli ja asema kansainvälisessä politiikassa ovat muuttuneet tämän ajanjakson aikana.

Tutkimustani varten haastattelen suomalaisia päättäjiä, tutkijoita ja asiantuntijoita. Olisin erittäin kiitollinen, jos Teillä olisi mahdollisuus osallistua lyhyeen haastatteluun aiheesta. Haastattelu kestäisi noin 30 minuuttia ja voitaisiin toteuttaa esimerkiksi Zoomin kautta Teille sopivana ajankohtana. Aikatauluni on valitettavasti melko tiivis, joten toivoisin mahdollisuuksien mukaan, että haastattelu voitaisiin toteuttaa 23.3.–29.4. välisenä aikana/8.5.

Kiitos paljon ajastanne ja harkinnastanne.

Ystävällisin terveisin,

Assi Rahiala

Master's Programme in Global Studies

Lund University

Appendix 2: Interview Email in English

Interview email translated into English (The translations should be understood as interpretative rather than strictly literal translations from Finnish to English)

Subject: Interview request for Master's thesis research

Hi!

I am contacting you to ask whether it would be possible to arrange an interview with XXXXX / I am contacting you to ask whether it would be possible to arrange an interview with you. *(The appropriate contact option depended on whether communication was initiated via an assistant or directly with the individual)*

My name is Assi Rahiala and I am a student in the Master's Programme in Global Studies at Lund University. I am currently writing my master's thesis on the transformation of Finland's international identity from EU membership to NATO membership, as well as on how Finland's role and position in international politics have changed during this period.

For my research, I am interviewing Finnish policymakers, researchers, and experts. I would be very grateful if you would be willing to participate in a short interview on the topic. The interview would last approximately 30 minutes and could be conducted, for example, via Zoom at a time convenient for you. Unfortunately, my schedule is rather tight, so I would kindly ask if the interview could, if possible, be arranged between 23 March and 29 April *(Later after approaching more people till 8th of May)*.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Assi Rahiala

Master's Programme in Global Studies

Lund University

Appendix 3: Consent Form



LUNDS
UNIVERSITET

Consent to participate in a Master Thesis at the Faculty of Social Sciences

I agree to participate in *From Strategic Restraint to a Global/European Actor: The Transformation of Finnish International Identity from EU Accession to NATO Membership*

Participation in a student project

This study is conducted as part of a Master's thesis in Global Studies, with a major in Political Science, at Lund University. The purpose of the research is to examine how Finland's international identity has evolved between 1995 and 2023. The study involves semi-structured interviews in which participants are asked about their perspectives on Finnish foreign and security policy, NATO membership, and Finland's international role. Participants have been invited because of their professional knowledge or expertise related to the topic. The interview is expected to last approximately 30 minutes.

Personal data is collected in order to conduct and document the interview and to analyze expert perspectives relevant to the research topic. Participation is voluntary and participants may withdraw from the study at any time.

Information on the processing of personal data

The following personal data will be processed:

- Name
- Professional title and institutional affiliation
- Contact information, such as E-mail address
- Audio recording of the interview
- Any statements given during the interview that can be linked to the participant

No sensitive personal data will be processed in this study.

Personal data will be processed in the following ways:

Interview data will be recorded (with the participant's consent) and transcribed for analysis. The data will be stored securely by the researcher on password-protected devices and will only be used for the purposes of this Master's thesis. Personal data will be retained only for the duration necessary to complete the thesis and will be deleted after the research project has been finalized. All personal data will be stored securely in accordance with GDPR and Lund University guidelines.

Please indicate your preference regarding identification in the thesis:

☐ I agree to be identified by name and professional affiliation in the thesis.

☐ I prefer to remain anonymous, and my name and identifying details should not be included in the thesis.

We do not share your personal data with third parties.

Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, Sweden, with organisation number 202100-3211 is the controller. You can find Lund University's privacy policy at www.lu.se/integritet

You have the right to receive information about the personal data we process about you. You also have the right to have inaccurate personal data about you corrected. If you have a complaint about our processing of your personal data, you can contact our Data Protection Officer at dataskyddsbud@lu.se. You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority (the Data Protection Authority, IMY) if you believe that we are processing your personal data incorrectly.

I agree to participate in *From Strategic Restraint to a Global/European Actor: The Transformation of Finnish International Identity from EU Accession to NATO Membership*

Location	Signature
Date	Name clarification

Appendix 4: Interview Guide in Finnish

Interview guide in Finnish

1. Tausta

Miten kuvailisit Suomen kansainvälistä roolia ja identiteettiä sen jälkeen, kun Suomi liittyi Euroopan unioniin vuonna 1995?

- *Mitkä tekijät ovat mielestäsi vaikuttaneet tähän eniten?*

2. Suomi idän ja lännen välissä

Suomea on usein kuvattu tasapainoilevana idän ja lännen välillä. Miten itse arvioit tätä kuvausta kylmän sodan päättymisen jälkeen?

- Miten Suomi mielestäsi onnistui tasapainottamaan länsi-integraation ja suhteiden ylläpitämisen Venäjään ennen vuotta 2022?
- Miten tämä tasapaino on muuttunut Venäjän Ukrainaan kohdistaman hyökkäyksen jälkeen?

3. Identiteetti

Onko Suomen kansainvälinen identiteetti mielestäsi muuttunut 1990-luvun jälkeen? Jos on, miten?

- Millaiset tapahtumat tai prosessit ovat vaikuttaneet tähän?

4. Ukraina – käännekohta?

Miten Venäjän hyökkäys Ukrainaan vuonna 2022 vaikutti Suomen turvallisuusajatteluun ja ulkopoliittiseen identiteettiin?

Näetkö Suomen päätöksen liittyä Natoon jatkumona aiemmalle kehitykselle vai enemmänkin käännekohtana?

Mitkä Suomen ulkopoliittisen identiteetin piirteet ovat mielestäsi säilyneet muutoksista huolimatta?

5. Suomen rooli tulevaisuudessa

Miten uskot Suomen kansainvälisen roolin kehittyvän nyt Nato-jäsenenä?

Voiko Suomi mielestäsi edelleen toimia sillanrakentajana tai välittäjänä kansainvälisessä politiikassa? Miksi tai miksi ei?

6. Viimeinen kysymys

Onko Suomen ulkopoliittisessa identiteetissä jotain sellaista, joka mielestäsi usein ymmärretään väärin tai jää huomiotta?

Appendix 5: Interview Guide in English

Interview guide translated into English (The translations should be understood as interpretative rather than strictly literal translations from Finnish to English).

1. Background

How would you describe Finland's international role and identity after it joined the European Union in 1995?

- *Which factors do you think have influenced this the most?*

2. Finland between East and West

Finland is often described as balancing between East and West. How do you assess this characterization after the end of the Cold War?

- How do you think Finland managed to balance Western integration and maintaining relations with Russia prior to 2022?
- How has this balance changed following Russia's invasion of Ukraine?

3. Identity

Do you think Finland's international identity has changed since the 1990s? If so, how?

- What events or processes have influenced this change?

4. Ukraine – a turning point?

How did Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 affect Finland's security thinking and foreign policy identity?

Do you see Finland's decision to join NATO as a continuation of previous developments or more as a turning point?

Which aspects of Finland's foreign policy identity do you think have remained stable despite these changes?

5. Finland's future role

How do you think Finland's international role will develop now as a NATO member?

Can Finland still act as a bridge-builder or mediator in international politics? Why or why not?

6. Final question

Is there anything in Finland's foreign policy identity that you think is often misunderstood or overlooked?

Appendix 5: Interviewees

A more detailed presentation of the interviewees. The interviewees are listed in the order in which the interviews were conducted.

1. Antti Kaikkonen, is a Finnish politician and Chair of the Centre Party of Finland since June 2024, and has been a Member of Parliament for several terms. He served as Finland's Minister of Defence in the governments of Prime Ministers Antti Rinne and Sanna Marin, from 2019 to 2023.
2. Hiski Haukkala, is the current Director of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) (2025–present). Until spring 2024, he served as Secretary General and Chief of Cabinet at the Office of the President of the Republic of Finland.
3. Teija Tiilikainen, is the Director of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. She previously served as Director of FIIA from 2010 to 2019.
4. Klaus Korhonen, who is currently Ambassador for Policy Planning at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland and Chair of the Executive Board of FIIA, as well as a Board Member of the Atlantic Council of Finland. He previously served as Finland's Ambassador to NATO (2019–2023) and, following Finland's accession to the Alliance, as the country's first Permanent Representative (April–August 2023).
5. Interviewee 5 chose to remain anonymous therefore no detailed description is provided
6. Matti Pesu, is a Finnish International Relations scholar and Senior Research Fellow at FIIA, whose research focuses on Finnish foreign and security policy, NATO, and Northern European security.
7. Pekka Toveri, is a Finnish politician (National Coalition Party) and Member of the European Parliament (EPP Group) elected in 2024, focusing on European security, defence, and supporting Ukraine. He is a retired Finnish Defence Forces Major General (serving 1985–2021) with extensive expertise in military intelligence, international security, and Russian military affairs. After retiring, he served, among other roles, as an affiliated researcher at FIIA.

8. Iro Särkkä, is a Senior Research Fellow in the Finland and Northern European Security research programme. Her expertise includes Finnish, Nordic and European foreign and security policy, NATO, French foreign and domestic policy, and forms of political behaviour.
9. Jukka Salovaara, is a Finnish diplomat who has served as State Secretary at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs since May 2022. From 2019 to 2022, he was Finland's Permanent Representative and Head of Mission to the United Nations.