



DECIPHERING FINLAND'S PIVOT: NEOCLASSICAL REALISM AND THE DECISION TO JOIN NATO IN 2022

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Abstract

This study examines Finland's decision to join NATO in 2022 through the lens of Neoclassical Realism, analyzing the interplay between systemic threats and domestic political factors. Employing qualitative methods, including literature review and expert interviews, the research investigates how shifts in regional power dynamics, fueled by NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's military actions, created systemic pressures. Concurrently, domestic media framing, public opinion, and elite debates mediated these external influences, shaping Finland's foreign policy response. Findings reveal that the convergence of systemic security threats and domestic political dynamics prompted a strategic pivot, illustrating the significance of domestic actors and perceptions in small state foreign policy under conditions of systemic threat. This research advances understanding of alliance formation by integrating systemic and domestic-level analyses, contributing valuable insights into regional security and NATO's evolving role in Europe

Keywords: alliance formation, Finland, NATO, neoclassical realism, Russia

Introduction

Security issue remains a major concern after World War II and the Cold War. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), formed in 1949 to counter the Soviet Union, continues to play a pivotal role in defense cooperation and regional stability, expanding its influence into Eastern Europe, including countries such as Ukraine. Under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine strengthened ties with the West, notably through a 2020 national security strategy emphasizing NATO partnership. While this underscored NATO's importance for Ukraine, it also heightened tensions with Russia. Ukraine's role as a buffer zone in Eurasia made NATO's eastward expansion a direct geopolitical threat to Moscow, with Russian President Vladimir Putin viewing Ukraine as vital due to its shared border with Russia (Berthanila, 2022; Pratiwi, 2023). If Ukraine joins NATO, there are concerns that it could become the front line of the alliance in threatening Russia's sovereignty, potentially through the development of weapon installations that could be used to attack Russia (CNN, 2022). Due to these fears, Russia began invading Ukraine earlier in 2022, even before Ukraine and NATO could potentially invade Russia.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, striking cities like Kyiv and Kharkiv in a major act of aggression that undermined regional security. The attack drew global condemnation and led to sanctions from the European Union, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Japan (Puspita, 2022). As a result, the invasion reshaped Europe's security order, prompting NATO to shift from a defensive role to actively supporting Ukraine with training and advanced weaponry, while Ukraine showed strong resilience (CNN, 2024; Wirachmi & Utami, 2023).

Alongside humanitarian aid to Ukraine, Western states—particularly the United Kingdom, Germany, France, the United States, and other members of the European Union and NATO—imposed more than 16,500 sanctions to weaken Russia's economy and deter further aggression. While these measures caused a brief 2.1 percent decline in early 2022, Russia's economy soon recovered, reducing the overall effectiveness of the sanctions (BBC, 2024). Broadly speaking, this invasion has the potential to alter the long-term landscape of international relations. There are also concerns that it could trigger an arms race in Europe and strengthen military alliances in the region (Kumparan, 2022).

Aside from fueling an arms race, this invasion has also influenced the perceptions of countries in the region, such as Finland. Geographically, Finland is located on the

Scandinavian Peninsula, bordering Sweden, Norway, Russia, the Baltic Sea, and the Arctic Ocean. Finland is a Northern European country with a land border of approximately 1,340 km shared with Russia (Noang, 2022; Unpar, 2022). Russia's invasion of Ukraine heightened Finland's security concerns, unsettling its traditionally stable post-World War II relations with Moscow. The proximity of Russia, combined with its vast nuclear arsenal of more than 4,000 active warheads, reinforced Finland's perception of an imminent threat and shaped its foreign policy shift (Laoli, 2024).

Russia's nuclear arsenal poses a serious threat to Finland, especially given its shared border and geographic proximity. In an unstable regional environment, Finland is afraid it could become a military target, underscoring the urgency of reevaluating its defense and security strategies. (Antara, 2022). Beyond military threats, Russia's invasion also destabilized regional energy security, causing supply disruptions and price surges as much of Europe's energy flows through pipelines via Ukraine (Mahmuddin & Burhanuddin, 2024).

In 2022, Finland remained heavily dependent on Russian energy, with over 40 percent of its oil, gas, and coal imports coming from Moscow. This reliance highlighted Finland's vulnerability, as its energy stability and security were closely tied to Russia during a period of rising geopolitical tensions (Vadén et al., 2023). Russia's invasion posed both military and energy security threats to Finland, intensifying perceptions of vulnerability. In response, Finland made the historic decision to join NATO in May 2022, ending its long-standing neutrality since World War II and signaling a major shift in European security dynamics (Henley, 2022).

This study argues that Finland's decision to join NATO in 2022 was driven by an interplay between systemic security threats and domestic political dynamics, as explained through the Neoclassical Realist framework. It demonstrates that the shifting distribution of power in Eastern and Northern Europe—particularly NATO's regional expansion and the increasing perception of Russian threat—exerted systemic pressure on Finland's security calculus. At the same time, domestic factors such as evolving public opinion, media framing that emphasized Russia as an aggressor, and intense political debates within Finland's parliament mediated these external pressures, shaping national responses. By ultimately synthesizing these two levels of analysis, this research finds that

the convergence of systemic threats and domestic political processes led Finland to decisively pivot towards NATO membership.

This contribution advances the literature by highlighting the significant role of domestic political actors and perceptions—elements often underappreciated in traditional security studies—in shaping small states' foreign policy decisions under systemic threat. Moreover, it provides a comprehensive perspective on Finland's strategic shift amidst the changing European security landscape, bridging the gap between systemic and domestic explanations and offering insights into alliance politics and security policy in the post-Cold War era.

Methodology

In this study, the authors adopt a qualitative approach to understand the phenomena being studied. Qualitative research is a method aimed at understanding phenomena that do not require numerical measurement (Darmawan & Karmilawaty, 2023). This approach is suitable for exploring aspects of organizational functions, social movements, and interpersonal relationships (Abdussamad, 2021; Syalim & Syahrum, 2012). The specific type of research employed is explanatory, which aims to analyze one variable in relation to others and to understand how these variables influence each other (Alang, 2018).

Data collection in this study was conducted through a literature review utilizing sources such as books, journal articles, research reports, and previous studies. The second method involved interviews with key informants, including Dr. Polit Sc. Henny Saptatia D.N., S.S., M.A., Head of the European Region Study Program at the School of Strategic and Global Studies, University of Indonesia, and Drs. Muhadi Sugiono, M.A., a senior academic in the Department of International Relations at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Gadjah Mada University, who also serves as the Chair of the Indonesian Community for European Studies. Lastly, document studies were conducted on sources such as the NATO Agreement, official documents from Finland, and NATO's annual reports.

The collected data were analyzed through a qualitative interpretative approach. Each source—from literature, interviews, and official documents—was examined thematically to identify recurring causal patterns that linked systemic pressures with domestic political responses. Interview data were used to validate interpretations from the

literature review, while document analysis provided institutional evidence supporting the causal inference between systemic stimuli and Finland's foreign policy decision. This triangulation ensured analytical consistency and strengthened the validity of the findings.

Literature Review

Neoclassical Realism

In this study, the authors employ Gideon Rose's theory of Neoclassical Realism. This framework offers a comprehensive analytical approach to understanding the dynamics of international politics, spanning from decision-making at the individual level to structural factors at the systemic level. This theory can explain various phenomena, including crisis decision-making, patterns of foreign policy, and the evolution of international system structures (Ripsman et al., 2016; Rose, 1998).

Neoclassical Realism combines Classical Realism's focus on human nature and power with Neorealism's systemic perspective. Classical Realism views human desire for power as the root of conflict, stressing national interests, state survival, and the anarchic nature of international politics. Classical Realism views states as rational, self-interested actors that pursue power and security in an anarchic international system (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013; Steans & Pettiford, 2009).

In contrast, Neorealism shifts the focus to the international structure, arguing that systemic forces and state interactions, rather than human nature, primarily shape foreign policy behavior (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013). The anarchic structure of the international system forces states to remain constantly vigilant against threats from other states. Consequently, the foreign policies of states are ultimately determined by their positions within this system (Bakry, 2017; Hadiwinata, 2017).

From the brief exposition of Classical Realism and Neorealism above, it is evident that these two theories hold contrasting perspectives in understanding states, foreign policy, and international politics. Classical Realism highlights the state as the main actor shaping foreign policy through power and survival, while Neorealism stresses how the anarchic international system itself drives state behavior. In the formulation of foreign policy, the state is seen as the key determinant in shaping the future direction of the international system, but at the same time, the system itself drives states towards certain policies, rather than states independently shaping the system's trajectory.

The mechanism of Neoclassical Realism is relatively straightforward: the international system functions as a systemic stimulus that is interpreted by domestic conditions, such as domestic politics, which in turn produces foreign policy based on that interpretation. Within this framework, three types are identified to explain Neoclassical Realism: Type I, II, and III. However, in this study, the researcher focuses only on Neoclassical Realism Type I and II (Ripsman et al., 2016). Neoclassical Realism Type I explains how states interpret and respond differently to systemic pressures, while Type II goes further by linking domestic politics more comprehensively to foreign policy, offering deeper insights into international dynamics (Ripsman et al., 2016).

In studying this topic, the concepts of the distribution of power and domestic politics are essential for understanding foreign policy. According to Rose, the distribution of power is crucial for analyzing foreign policy and its implications. In this context, the concept refers to the capabilities and resources of power shared among actors within the international system (Powell, 1996). The distribution of power within an international system influences the behavior of states through their foreign policies. A more balanced distribution of power tends to reduce the likelihood of conflict. When measuring the distribution of power, an understanding of polarity is necessary. Polarity describes how power is distributed within the international system. It refers to the division of power based on two or more opposing ideas (De Keersmaecker, 2017). The types of polarity in the distribution of power are categorized into three: unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar.

Other than that, domestic politics also serve as a significant factor influencing decision-making. Domestic politics are considered determinants of a country's foreign policy direction. These influencing factors include ideology, elite competition, pressure from political parties, mass media, public opinion, and bureaucracy (Fearon, 1998). Therefore, upon closer examination, this concept is relevant to Neoclassical Realism, where domestic politics function as a 'filter' through which any occurrence within the international system is viewed.

Beyond elite dynamics, a substantial body of research emphasizes the role of media and public opinion in shaping foreign policy behavior. Studies in political communication highlight that media outlets do not merely report international events but frame them in ways that influence how societies interpret external threats and policy options. These frames can contribute to the construction of national narratives, shape perceptions of

adversaries, and create pressure on political leaders to respond in particular ways. Public opinion, in turn, can act as both a constraint and an enabler of foreign policy, especially in democratic settings where leaders must secure legitimacy for major strategic decisions. For small states facing acute security shocks, shifts in media framing and public attitudes often become crucial channels through which systemic pressures are internalized, interpreted, and transformed into concrete policy outcomes.

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The distribution of power and domestic politics affects foreign policy. Foreign policy was initially defined as a state's strategies and decisions toward external actors (Bakry, 2017). It has since evolved to encompass policies, attitudes, and actions in international interactions. Budiardjo explains it as government decisions or rules aimed at achieving specific objectives in international relations, shaping a state's relations with others. According to her, foreign policy cannot be separated from two main factors: domestic conditions and the international situation, which mutually influence each other (Budiardjo, 2008).

In addition to these core debates, existing scholarship also shows that Neoclassical Realism provides a useful lens for analyzing the foreign policy of small states. Although much of the early realist literature focused on great powers, more recent studies suggest that small states often combine systemic pressures with domestic interpretations when responding to external threats. Their limited material capabilities heighten sensitivity to shifts in the distribution of power, while internal political dynamics—such as elite consensus building, public sentiment, and strategic culture—shape how these external

signals are understood and translated into policy choices. This makes the Neoclassical Realist emphasis on domestic filtering particularly relevant for cases where small states must navigate asymmetric power relations and uncertain security environments. Finland's strategic situation, marked by geographic proximity to Russia and long-standing debates over neutrality, fits closely within this pattern and underscores why this framework is suitable for analyzing its 2022 NATO decision.

Results And Discussion

History, Politics, and Governance of Finland During the Neutral Period

Finland is a country in Northern Europe, situated within the Scandinavian region. Geographically, Finland is bordered by three countries: Norway to the north, Sweden to the west, and Russia to the east. To the south and southwest, Finland borders the Baltic Sea, which positions it strategically in regional and maritime relations (Tempo, 2023). Historically, Finland has been known as a nation that adheres to the principle of military neutrality, especially during the Cold War period, when it remained non-aligned and did not ally with any of the power blocs (Nokkala, 2022). This policy approach by Finland later became internationally recognized as “Finlandization.” The concept of Finlandization refers to the relationship between Finland and the Soviet Union, emphasizing Finland’s efforts to maintain its sovereignty while pursuing a cautious and prudent foreign policy (Roh et al., 2024).

This relationship began with the Winter War, a major conflict between the Soviet Union and Finland in the Arctic region that lasted for 105 days. The Winter War erupted in November 1939 after Finland refused Soviet demands to cede territory at the Karelian Isthmus. In response, the Soviet Union launched a large-scale invasion from multiple directions, marking the start of a 105-day conflict during World War II (Beck, 2018; Quist, 2019).

The military imbalance between the Soviet Union and Finland led Finland to sign a peace treaty, marking the beginning of a new phase in their relationship. The Moscow Peace Treaty of March 1940 ended the war, forcing Finland to cede 10 percent of its territory and resettle about 500,000 citizens (Quist, 2019). Since this treaty, Finland has tended to compromise in its bilateral relations with the Soviet Union (Arter, 2023). After World War II, Finland’s foreign and security policies were based on the Friendship,

Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance Treaty with the Soviet Union, which mandated alignment with Soviet political interests, including potential military involvement against Germany (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016)

Finlandization acted as preventive diplomacy to ease tensions with the Soviet Union while preserving sovereignty, within Finland's semi-presidential—now parliamentary—system led by a president, prime minister, and unicameral parliament. (Eduskunta, 2025; European Committee of the Regions, 2025; Widayati, 2015). During the semi-presidential period, the president held significant authority in foreign affairs, allowing domestic policy adjustments to align with Soviet interests to maintain political stability and bilateral relations (Arter, 2023).

During the Cold War period, Finland's political landscape was characterized by a multiparty system consisting of nine parties with diverse ideologies. These included the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which espoused center-left social democracy; the Centre Party, advocating agrarianism and liberal centrism; and the National Coalition Party (KOK), representing center-right conservative liberalism. Additionally, there was the Finnish People's Democratic League (SKDL), now transformed into the Left Alliance (VAS), which was a coalition of socialist-communist factions; the Green League (VIHR), with a center-right ideological stance; the Swedish People's Party (SFP), representing the Swedish-speaking minority and characterized by liberalism; the Christian Democrats (KD), with socially conservative values rooted in Christianity; and the Liberal People's Party (LKP), which has since dissolved but was also liberal-leaning. The Finns Party (PS), with a right-populist conservative ideology, was also part of the multiparty system. The existence of leftist-communist parties served as a bridge for the Soviet Union to influence domestic politics in Finland (Dbpedia, 2019; Finns Party, 2018; Keskusta, 2018; Kokoomus, 2025; Kristillis Demokraatit, 2025; Raunio, 2018; SDP, 2025; SFP.RKP, 2020; Vasemmisto, 2020).

These political developments suggest that the Soviet Union exerted indirect influence on Finland's politics, with Finlandization reflected in passive media censorship under the 1947 Peace Treaty, which banned anti-Soviet propaganda (Arter, 2023). The Finlandization helped Finland preserve its sovereignty but limited its foreign policy freedom, as it avoided military alliances and joint exercises to maintain neutrality (Holmila & Ahonen, 2022). However, this cautious stance waned following the end of

the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finland began integrating more closely with Western institutions, joining the European Union in March 1992 and initiating partnership ties with NATO in 1994. Finland's official neutrality was fully abandoned when it joined NATO in 2022 (Arter, 2023).

Distribution of Power in the Eastern European Region

The power dynamics in Europe are still predominantly influenced by NATO and Russia, continuing the rivalry established during the Cold War. Russia strives to maintain its influence in its traditional sphere, while NATO—initially focused on Western Europe—has expanded eastward, reflecting a transformation in regional security and perpetuating the rivalry between the West and Russia. The rise of modern power dynamics is marked by NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe since the early 1990s, beginning with the reunification of East and West Germany. This reunification raised concerns in the Soviet Union about Germany joining the Western Bloc. In 1990, West German and United States Foreign Ministers issued statements interpreted as guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward toward the Soviet border (Catalano, 2024).

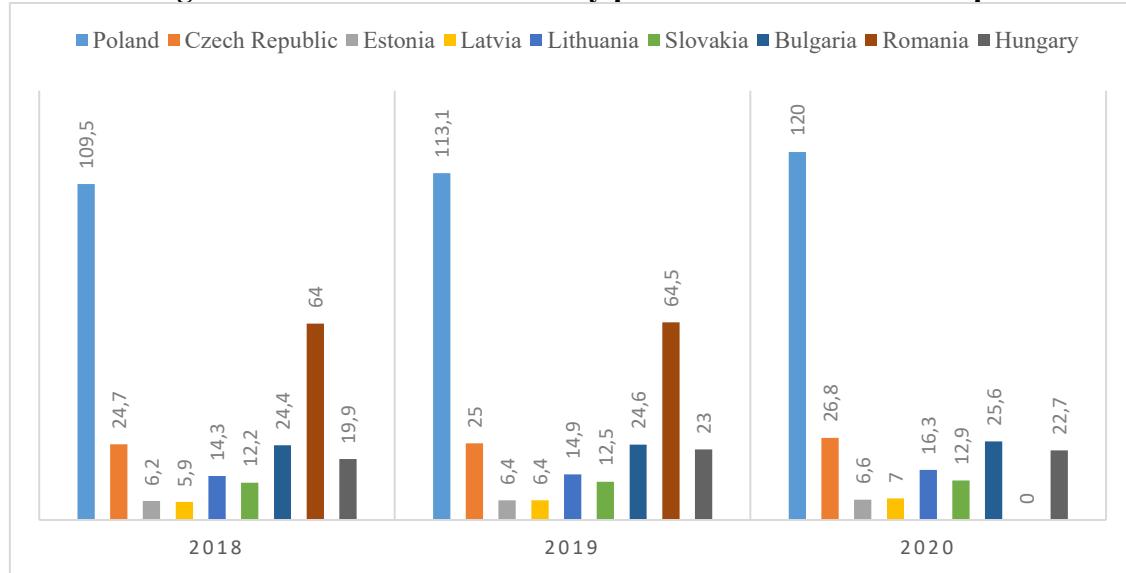
This negotiation evolved into the Two Plus Four Agreement between West and East Germany and the four Allied powers of World War II, which enabled German reunification, Soviet troop withdrawal, and the freedom to choose alliances, symbolizing the Cold War's end and the Warsaw Pact's collapse (Catalano, 2024). According to Saptatia (2025), the reunification of Germany served as an initial trigger for NATO's eastward expansion. After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland showed interest in joining NATO starting in March 1990, aiming to bolster regional stability (Saptatia, 2025). Initially, the United States opposed this expansion. However, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, a platform for dialogue and cooperation without full membership, was established as a compromise (Catalano, 2024).

While Eastern European states saw NATO expansion as attractive, Russia viewed it as a threat. The United States argued the Two Plus Four Agreement applied only to Germany, and in 1999 the Visegrad states joined NATO (Catalano, 2024). The desire of these countries to join NATO was facilitated by the Open Door Policy outlined in Article 10 of the 1949 NATO Treaty (NATO, 1949). NATO's Open Door Policy enables states

to seek membership, expanding in five stages since 1999 to enhance European security. Candidates must uphold democracy, human rights, and international law (Globsec, 2023).

The expansion of NATO via the Open Door Policy became increasingly serious and potentially threatening as it approached Russia's borders. This shift is marked by the accession of three Baltic states—Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—in 2004. Their NATO membership was perceived as a direct threat by Russia, which shares borders with these countries. According to Saptatia (2025), the Baltic region, along with Visegrad countries and Eastern and Central European nations such as Romania and Bulgaria, potentially serve as NATO military base locations. Their geographical proximity to Russia makes NATO's presence in these areas a tangible security concern for Russia (Saptatia, 2025). This perceived threat is further supported by data on NATO military personnel stationed in Eastern Europe from 2018 to 2020.

Figure 1. Data on NATO military personnel in Eastern Europe



Source: Processed from NATO Annual Report (NATO, 2020).

Based on the data above, there has been an increase in NATO military personnel in countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. This increase in military personnel can be perceived differently by Russia as a potential threat. The threat is further amplified by the principle of Collective Defense as outlined in Article 5 of the NATO Treaty of 1949 (NATO, 1949).

Formally, this principle states that an attack on one NATO member is considered an attack on all members of the alliance. This principle serves as NATO's bargaining power among its member countries. Therefore, it is rational for many countries to want

to join NATO to receive assistance in facing potential threats from other powers (Sugiono, 2025). According to Sugiono (2025), the principle of collective defense is highly advantageous for countries that lack strong military capabilities but need protection from external threats in a turbulent international environment. However, this principle can be perceived as a threat by external actors, known as the security dilemma.

In its development, NATO established the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) in the Baltic states and Poland in 2017 as a response to Russia's actions in Georgia, Crimea, and Kaliningrad. Led by the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and the United States, the EFP involves stationed core troops for joint training exercises. NATO also strengthened military presence in Southeast Europe across all military branches to enhance readiness and interoperability (Palavenis, 2024). This EFP includes military deployment at the beginning of 2017 aimed at deterrence against Russia. NATO also increased national capability and synergy (Miliušas & Denisenko, 2020)

In addition to military exercises, NATO supports host nations with about \$30 million annually in military aid plus \$1.2 million for training and education (Pradana & Ramadhoan, 2022). Given NATO's actions in the region, it is understandable that Russia perceives such activities as a threat. Russia's response to NATO's apparent encirclement includes efforts to maintain influence over former Soviet states, such as Georgia in 2008, and the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbass in 2014 (Saeri et al., 2023). Russia further reinforced its stance with declarations of independence by the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2022.

Beyond the conflicts in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk, since 2016, Russia has militarized Kaliningrad as a frontline against NATO in the Baltics, shifting it from an industrial hub into a strategic military zone (Saptatia, 2025). By 2016, Kaliningrad became a heavily fortified A2/AD zone, hindering NATO operations and alarming Baltic states and Poland, in line with Russia's 2015 National Security Strategy opposing NATO expansion (Pradana & Ramadhoan, 2022).

In February 2022, Russia launched a major invasion of Ukraine via a declared "special military operation," attacking Kyiv and Kharkiv, resulting in hundreds of casualties. Unlike the 2014 Crimea annexation, this aggression was on a national scale. Ukraine responded with a state of emergency and mobilization of troops, while Russia accelerated escalation efforts through missile strikes and the blockade of strategic cities,

including Kyiv and Mariupol (Walker, 2025). Russia's invasion explicitly rejects the post-World War II international order, which stipulates that borders should not be altered by force (Brunk & Hakimi, 2022). This invasion represents an accumulation of responses to NATO's regional activities and Russia's interpretation of threats posed by NATO's expansion.

Based on these developments, NATO's increasingly expansive activities have forced Russia to respond either through deterrence or invasion to block NATO's sphere of influence. According to Saptatia (2025), Russia aims to maintain its influence over former Soviet states or at least ensure their neutrality and non-alignment with NATO. In response to the invasion, NATO activated its NATO Response Force, signaling that NATO is prepared for any Russian moves (Saptatia, 2025).

Ultimately, this situation illustrates that Russia is perceived not only as an international threat but also as a key driver behind NATO's expansion, which in turn poses concrete threats to Russia—prompting its counteractions. This creates competing narratives about who is at fault, shaped by each side's perspective. The distribution of power is driven by reciprocal actions: when one side takes a step, the other responds similarly, perpetuating a cycle of escalation. The Russia–NATO power balance also influences perceptions among non-aligned countries like Finland. Although international law designates Finland's neutral status as protective, Finland remains vulnerable to potential threats (Sugiono, 2025). Finland's concerns are reinforced by actions taken by Russia, such as Vladimir Putin's warning in 2016 against Finland's potential NATO membership (Lokker & Hautala, 2023).

According to Saptatia (2025) and Sugiono (2025), Russia's aggression and the fact that most regional countries have joined NATO have prompted Finland to consider accession to the alliance. Finland recognizes that, without full membership, it faces the risk of lacking protection should it become a target of Russia. The changing distribution of power between NATO and Russia in Eastern Europe has triggered new tensions, altered the security configuration, and heightened regional concerns, particularly for Finland, which shares a direct border with Russia. This situation has prompted Finland to reassess its defense orientation, which is influenced not only by systemic factors but also by domestic politics, such as the role of media, public opinion, and elite dynamics.

Finland's Domestic Politics

Besides perceptions of the power distribution between NATO and Russia, domestic politics also play a significant role, such as how Finnish mass media contribute to shaping Finland's decision to join NATO. Finnish society still relies on mass media as a primary source of information (Clausnitzer, 2024). Among the various media outlets in Finland, the public broadcasting organization Yle remains particularly influential. During February to May 2022, Yle's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war and its impacts exhibited a diverse range of framing.

In February, Yle's coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war was initially neutral, presenting narratives from both sides and providing space for Russia's perspective. However, after the outbreak of war, the framing began to shift. Yle continued to attempt a neutral presentation but with some sympathy towards Ukraine. The framing increasingly adopted perspectives aligned with NATO, with language describing Russia as "brutal," emphasizing Ukraine's need for international aid, and portraying Russia negatively. This shift indicates a change in the media framing pattern on Yle's part (Heiskanen, 2022).

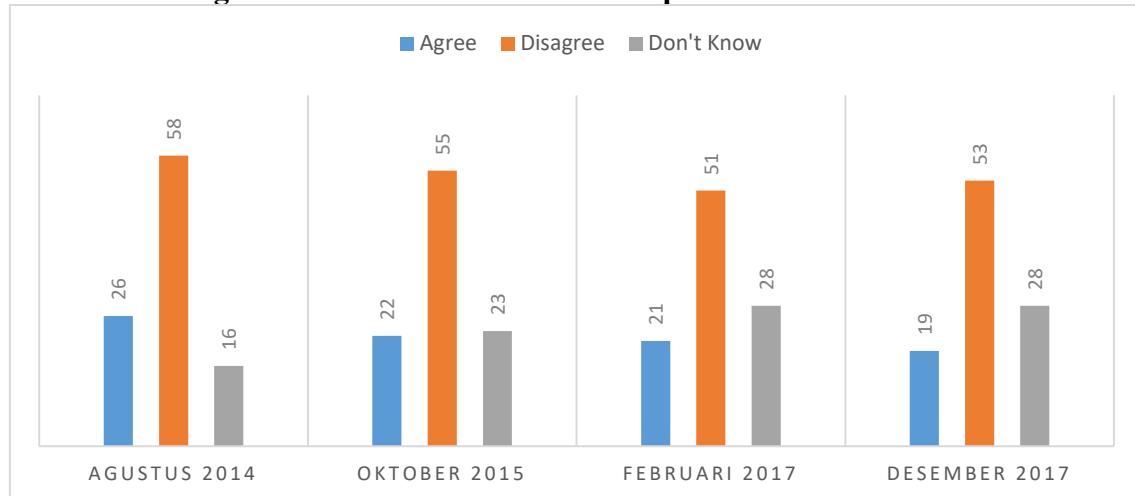
In March, Yle's coverage was quite dynamic, with several articles framing Russia negatively, portraying it as an aggressor, and using terms like "unjustified attack," emphasizing that Russia's actions are considered baseless and unlawful (BTI, 2022). However, there were also articles and podcasts maintaining a neutral stance, focusing on the impact on Finland. The narratives in Yle's April coverage remained fluid. Occasionally, Yle framed Russia as the aggressor, refraining from reporting Russian justifications behind Western accusations (STT, 2022). Conversely, Yle did not portray Russia as the sole violator of international law — instead, it also reported negative narratives about Ukraine, such as alleged violations of international laws by Ukrainian citizens. This illustrates that in April, Russia was not consistently depicted with a negative narrative, highlighting the complexity and nuance in media framing (Töyrylä, 2022a).

Between February and May 2022, Yle's coverage tended to lean pro-Western, although some narratives remained neutral. Several articles and podcasts presented neutral tones, but the majority were pro-Western with a negative portrayal of Russia. Yle predominantly highlighted perspectives from Ukraine, NATO, the United States, and Finland, while almost no space was allocated to Russian viewpoints or the justification

of NATO expansion often used as a rationale for Russian attacks. In the May articles, Russia was sometimes framed negatively, with narratives describing it as ‘cruel’ and emphasizing the need for Western collective aid to support Ukraine (Husu & Toivonen, 2022). However, despite presenting numerous accusations against Russia, Yle still strived to remain neutral by showcasing refugee interviews as evidence and providing alternative perspectives (Töyrylä, 2022b).

From these media narratives, public opinion in Finland shifted significantly from before the war to after it. In 2022, Yle conducted three public opinion surveys (February, March, and May), which showed a substantial increase in support for NATO membership and a shift in public attitudes towards Russia. This contrast is notable compared to earlier surveys in 2014, 2015, and 2017, when tensions had not yet been felt. At that time, the public was largely opposed to Finland joining NATO (Forsberg, 2024).

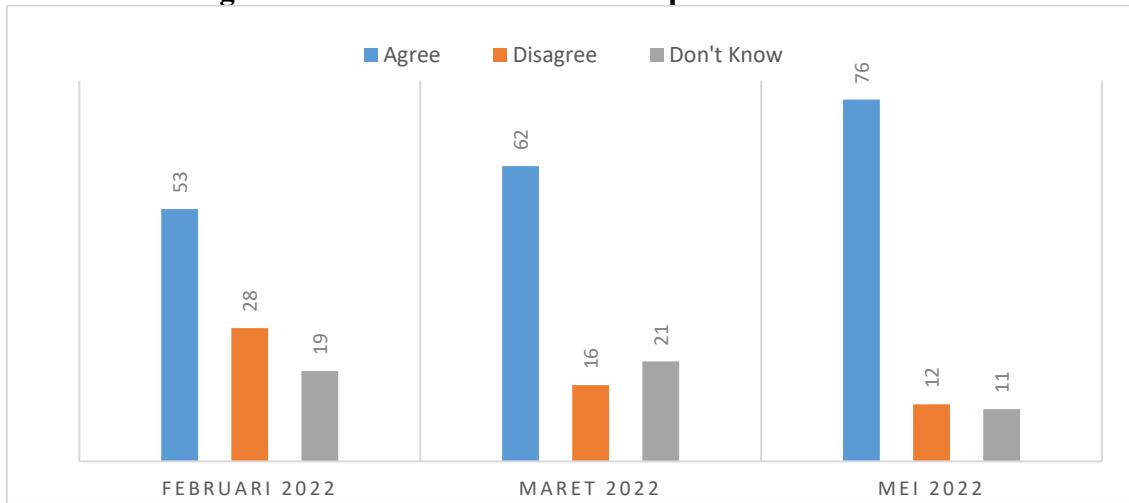
Figure 2. Data on Finnish Public Opinion Before the War



Source: Forsberg (2024).

Survey data indicate that the majority of Finnish society was initially skeptical about NATO membership, with many respondents expressing disagreement. Events such as Georgia in 2008 and Crimea in 2014 did not significantly influence these views, suggesting that public opinion at the time was quite stable and resistant to change. The data shows that Finns held a consistent stance towards NATO and were not influenced by the prospect of Sweden’s accession, leading them to see little urgency in abandoning their neutrality (Forsberg, 2024). However, since the Russia-Ukraine war broke out, Finnish public opinion regarding NATO has shifted considerably from previous attitudes. This change is reflected in the public opinion survey data conducted by Yle in 2022.

Figure 3. Data on Finnish Public Opinion After the War



Source: Forsberg (2024).

Based on this data, a significant shift occurred in public opinion from before the war to after it, with support for Finland's NATO membership increasing month by month. While the Finnish public was unaffected by the Georgia 2008 and Crimea 2014 crises, the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 was perceived as a major shock. Russia's warnings regarding the NATO Open Door Policy for neutral countries like Finland and Sweden triggered a change in public perception, now viewing NATO membership as an urgent necessity for security against external threats (Forsberg, 2024).

This public opinion was subsequently responded to by the Finnish parliament through sessions held on April 20 and May 16, 2022. The first session was opened by Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto, who presented Finland's security and geopolitical environment (Eduskunta, 2022a). In his speech, Haavisto condemned Russia's attack as a violation of international law and emphasized Finland's need to prioritize national security due to geographical proximity and the threat of non-conventional weapons from Russia. He also highlighted the importance of re-evaluating Finland's security policy. This reassessment was undertaken by several European countries, including Sweden, another neutral nation (Eduskunta, 2022a).

Haavisto's speech received support from multiple parties: the SDP, KOK, VIHR, SFP, KD, PS, the Centre Party (KESK), and Movement Now (*Liike Nyt*). Conversely, the VAS expressed concerns about NATO membership, arguing that after years of neutrality, such a decision should not be rushed. They emphasized the need for caution to minimize risks (Eduskunta, 2022a).

The second session took place on May 16, 2022, with Prime Minister Sanna Marin delivering the opening speech. She stated that a report on NATO accession had been submitted to the government, and the government proposed that the President submit Finland's NATO membership application following consultations with Parliament. During this session, the SDP announced full support for NATO membership, shifting from its previous skeptical stance before Russia's invasion (Fittante, 2023). The Finns Party also supported membership, citing changes in public opinion, budget preparedness, and the belief that NATO could deter Russian aggression (Eduskunta, 2022b).

Representatives from the KOK also expressed support. Having long promoted cooperation with NATO, the KOK has supported accession even before the war. The KESK voiced full backing, emphasizing Finland's need for strong national defense, land cooperation, and ongoing security guarantees within an unstable geopolitical context. The VIHR supported NATO membership as the most effective deterrent against potential attack, also noting that public opinion shifts should be accommodated within democratic policymaking. The SFP endorsed NATO membership, considering NATO's Article 5 as crucial for Finland's security (Eduskunta, 2022b).

Finally, the KD expressed unwavering support for NATO accession, believing it would enhance overall defense capabilities. *Liike Nyt* also supported joining NATO, citing historical conflicts with Russia that should not be repeated now that Finland's NATO membership would serve as a safeguard (Eduskunta, 2022b). Meanwhile, the VAS remained skeptical about NATO membership, arguing that it did not guarantee Finland's security and could instead provoke threats from Russia. They highlighted the risks associated with the uncertain period before ratification but emphasized the importance of cautious and critical, yet constructive, observation (Eduskunta, 2022b). This parliamentary session revealed a range of views, from viewing NATO membership as a security guarantee against Russia to opportunities for contributing to peacekeeping missions, strategies for maintaining stability, and concerns about the risks of nuclear confrontation that could shift Finland's role from mediator to target. Despite these debates, the final voting results showed 188 votes in favor, eight against, and three members absent. Strong support came from the major parties mentioned during the parliamentary session, while the small minority opposition consisted mainly of left-wing

members. With this approval, the NATO accession consensus report was forwarded to the Foreign Affairs Committee for further review before being submitted to the President.

Finland's Decision to Join NATO

Following the parliamentary debate on May 16, 2022, the President of Finland—alongside Sweden—submitted their applications for NATO membership on May 18, 2022, just two days after the parliamentary session (NATO, 2022). This move officially ended Finland's neutrality and policy of non-alignment. During the submission, Finland's Ambassador to NATO, Klaus Korhonen, personally delivered the membership application and NATO accession report to NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg at NATO Headquarters in Brussels (NATO, 2022).

The NATO accession process for Finland proceeded in accordance with Article 10 of the NATO Treaty, which stipulates that invited states join through the consensus of existing member countries, with full rights and obligations. Through this accession, Finland will be protected under NATO's Article 5, which guarantees collective defense (Finnish Government, 2022). By joining NATO, Finland committed to adhering to the alliance's principles, including the NATO Treaty or Washington Treaty, and to contributing to annual budgets sourced from civilian and military funding, as well as the NATO Security Investment Programme (NSIP). Finland also committed to spending two percent of its GDP on defense annually and participating in NATO missions such as collective security operations during peacetime, multinational capability projects, and command and control systems (Finnish Government, 2022).

Neoclassical Realist Analysis on Finland's Decision to Join NATO

The results of the study indicate that Finland's decision to join NATO in 2022 aligns with Neoclassical Realism, where the decision is influenced by systemic stimuli (independent variable), domestic politics (intervening variable), and results in foreign policy (dependent variable). In this context, the independent variable is the systemic stimulus in the form of the distribution of power in Eastern and Northern Europe. NATO's expansion through the Open Door Policy from 1999 to 2020 has encouraged many countries to join to strengthen collective security (Globsec, 2023).

However, Russia perceives this move as a threat to its national security, as the closer NATO and its member countries are to Eastern Europe, the greater the pressure and threat Russia feels in its region. In response, Russia has engaged in various activities as a deterrence effort in the Eastern European region, such as the Russian military operations in Kaliningrad in 2016, which were reciprocated by NATO through its military and political activities like Military Deployment and Enhanced Forward Presence as a form of military deterrence against Russia (Miliušas & Denisenko, 2020; Palavenis, 2024). This results in a pattern of relationship and dynamics that are mutually responsive.

The tension reached its peak when Russia launched an attack against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, following the declaration of a ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine. The attack was intense and relentless, resulting in the death of over 300 civilians. This assault was Russia’s attempt to block NATO’s influence from approaching its borders (Brunk & Hakimi, 2022; Saeri et al., 2023; Walker, 2025). According to the authors’ analysis, the presence of NATO and the Russian threat are the main factors in Finland’s foreign policy reorientation. From a Neoclassical Realist perspective, the bipolar power distribution in Eastern Europe serves as the systemic stimulus, which Finland interprets by viewing Russia as a threat and NATO as a strategic option. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the trauma of the Winter War reinforce this perception, making NATO not just a military alliance but a savior from potential Russian aggression.

The perceived threat from Russia was transmitted into the domestic political sphere through three interrelated indicators that collectively shaped Finland’s policy shift. First, media framing played a crucial role in constructing public narratives about national security. Yle, Finland’s leading public broadcaster, progressively emphasized Russia’s aggression after the February 2022 invasion, portraying it as a blatant violation of international law and an existential threat to regional stability. The tone of coverage shifted from neutral reporting to explicitly highlighting Ukraine’s resistance and NATO’s defensive posture. This discursive framing gradually reduced Finland’s long-standing neutrality in public discourse and aligned domestic sentiment with Western security perspectives.

Second, public opinion reflected a rapid internalization of these mediated threat perceptions. Survey data published by Yle demonstrated a historic transformation: support for NATO membership, which had consistently remained below 30 percent in

previous years, surged to 53 percent in March 2022 and exceeded 75 percent by May 2022. This dramatic change indicates that Finnish citizens no longer viewed neutrality as a viable security option. Instead, systemic threats were reinterpreted domestically as a direct risk to Finland's survival, showing how media narratives effectively bridged the gap between external systemic pressures and internal public psychology.

Third, political elites within the Finnish parliament translated these public sentiments into concrete policy action. In the plenary sessions of April 20 and May 16, 2022, parliamentary leaders from major parties—including the Social Democrats (SDP), the National Coalition Party (KOK), and the Centre Party (KESK)—framed NATO membership as both a defensive necessity and a reflection of democratic legitimacy. Prime Minister Sanna Marin and Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto explicitly emphasized that joining NATO was essential for national security given Finland's 1,340-kilometer border with Russia. Even previously cautious parties shifted toward consensus as public opinion hardened against Russia. This elite realignment shows that domestic actors did not merely react to public pressure but strategically harnessed it to justify a decisive foreign policy transformation.

Collectively, these three indicators—media framing, public opinion, and elite decision-making—demonstrate the multi-layered domestic mechanism through which systemic pressures were interpreted, amplified, and institutionalized. The process aligns with Neoclassical Realism's Type II framework, where external stimuli are filtered through domestic perceptions and political structures, ultimately producing a coherent policy outcome.

The outcome of the interaction between the independent variable and the intervening variable resulted in the dependent variable, namely Finland's decision to join NATO on May 18, 2022. Through this policy, Finland agreed to commit to the NATO alliance. This relationship among the three variables reflects Neoclassical Realism Type II, which also emphasizes the role of domestic factors—such as media, public opinion, and elite perception—in shaping and constraining foreign policy, differing from Type I, which focuses only on interpreting international system signals (Ripsman et al., 2016).

Finland's NATO accession can be traced through a clear causal sequence consistent with Neoclassical Realism Type II. At the systemic level, the conjunction of NATO's eastward enlargement and Russia's escalating coercion—culminating in the February

2022 invasion—altered Finland’s threat environment and raised the perceived costs of continued non-alignment. These external shocks did not translate mechanically into policy. Rather, they were filtered domestically through three mutually reinforcing channels. First, media framing led by Yle increasingly depicted Russia’s actions as unlawful aggression and an immediate risk to regional order, narrowing the discursive space for neutrality. Second, public opinion rapidly internalized these cues: support for NATO membership—historically minor—surged to majority levels by March and exceeded two-thirds by May 2022, indicating that external threats had been cognitively reframed as a direct danger to Finland’s security (see Forsberg, 2024). Third, political elites converted this societal shift into authoritative policy: in the April 20 and May 16 plenary sessions, cross-party leaders (SDP, KOK, KESK, among others) articulated NATO membership as both a defensive necessity and a democratically grounded mandate, culminating in a decisive parliamentary endorsement (188–8–3) and the formal application on May 18, 2022 (Eduskunta, 2022a; 2022b; NATO, 2022).

While the Neoclassical Realist explanation offers a coherent account of Finland’s policy shift, it is important to acknowledge alternative interpretations. Some analyses emphasize broader European trends—such as the deepening of EU security cooperation, Sweden’s parallel consideration of NATO membership, or a collective regional reassessment of neutrality—as potential drivers of Finland’s decision. Others point to long-term debates within Finnish strategic circles regarding the sustainability of non-alignment. These perspectives highlight structural changes in Europe’s security architecture that extend beyond immediate Russian coercion. However, the chronology and intensity of Finland’s domestic reactions suggest that these broader factors alone cannot fully explain the timing or decisiveness of the 2022 pivot. Rather, they served as background conditions that became politically salient only when filtered through domestic perceptions of the Russian threat following the invasion of Ukraine. This reinforces the Neoclassical Realist view that systemic stimuli gain causal force only after being interpreted within national political arenas.

This pathway demonstrates the Type II logic in full: systemic pressures generated a strong perception of vulnerability, but domestic interpretive mechanisms—media narratives, mass preferences, and elite coalition building within parliamentary institutions—shaped the timing, content, and legitimacy of the response. In other words,

Finland's choice was neither a purely structural reflex nor a solely inward-looking political decision. It was a synthesized outcome in which international power shifts provided the impetus, while domestic actors translated that impetus into a stable policy equilibrium compatible with national consensus and institutional procedure. Hence, the decision to join NATO is best understood as the product of an external stimulus refracted through internal filters that aligned societal expectations, elite strategies, and legal-institutional channels into a singular strategic realignment (Forsberg, 2024; Eduskunta, 2022a, 2022b; NATO, 2022).

Conclusion

This study explored the underlying factors influencing Finland's decision to join NATO in 2022, employing a qualitative method rooted in Neoclassical Realist theory. By analyzing systemic, domestic, and individual-level variables, the research aimed to understand how external security threats and internal political dynamics interact to shape foreign policy outcomes. Building on existing literature that emphasizes both systemic power distributions and domestic political influences, this study advances the understanding of small states' strategic choices in contemporary security environments.

The findings reveal that Finland's pivotal decision was primarily driven by the escalating security threats posed by Russia's increased militarization and aggressive actions in the region, especially following the invasion of Ukraine. The systemic stimulus—namely the shifting power distribution between NATO and Russia—created external pressures that shaped Finland's security calculus. Simultaneously, domestic politics played a crucial role, with media framing, public opinion, and elite debates mediating systemic signals and amplifying perceived threats, ultimately guiding national policy shifts. This interplay corroborates the Type II variant of Neoclassical Realism, which emphasizes the importance of domestic filters in translating systemic pressures into foreign policy decisions.

From a broader perspective, these results align with and expand upon existing scholarship on alliance politics and regional security dynamics. Previous literature, such as Rose (1998) and Ripsman et al. (2016), underscores the significance of domestic factors in shaping state behavior under threat, a notion reinforced by these empirical findings. Moreover, the study enriches debates on NATO's eastward expansion and

Russia's responses, illustrating how perceptions of threat and power distribution reinforce a cycle of escalation and containment. The case of Finland exemplifies how systemic security dilemmas interact with internal political considerations, offering valuable insights into the complex mechanisms driving alliance formation and regional stability in the post-Cold War era.

This study demonstrates that Finland's NATO accession was not solely a response to external threats but also mediated by domestic political and media dynamics, confirming the relevance of Neoclassical Realism's multilevel approach. It underscores the importance of understanding both systemic power configurations and internal political environments when analyzing foreign policy decisions, especially for small states navigating a turbulent security landscape. These insights contribute to the broader literature by highlighting the crucial role of domestic perceptions and political actors in shaping strategic choices amidst shifting international power balances, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of alliance politics in contemporary international relations.

Future research could extend this analysis by examining whether similar domestic filtering mechanisms operate in other small states confronted with abrupt security shocks. A broader comparison that includes Sweden, the Baltic states, or non-European cases such as South Korea or Singapore would allow researchers to assess whether the dynamics observed in Finland reflect a more general pattern among small states facing asymmetric power relations. Such comparative inquiry would not only highlight similarities and differences across regions but also help clarify how distinct political cultures and institutional settings shape responses to systemic pressures. In addition, examining variations across time—particularly before and after major security crises—would provide further insight into how domestic narratives and elite coalitions evolve in relation to external threats. Taken together, these avenues of research would refine the theoretical scope of Neoclassical Realism and deepen our understanding of the conditions under which domestic perceptions and political structures exert decisive influence over major foreign policy realignments.

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