

Finland's Security Policy Transformation after Russia's 2022 Invasion: Continuity and Change on the Path to NATO Accession

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Abstrak

Abstract This article explains how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 influenced Finland's accession to NATO. Existing studies illuminate border geopolitics, historical memory, or public opinion, but give less attention to how these factors converged in a completed policy change. Using Regional Security Complex Theory and the concept of national interest, the article distinguishes long-term enabling conditions, the deterioration of Northern European security after 2014, and the invasion as an immediate trigger. It applies a qualitative case-study design based on official Finnish and NATO documents, polling data, scholarly literature, and reputable media used for chronology. The findings show that the invasion did not cause an abrupt rupture with Finland's prior security policy. It decisively accelerated a longer transformation in military non-alignment by altering how Finnish political actors and much of the public interpreted regional threat, sovereignty, and the value of treaty-based collective defence. NATO accession was therefore a contingent political choice made under changed security conditions, rather than an automatic response to geography or Russian power.

Abstrak Artikel ini menjelaskan bagaimana invasi skala penuh Rusia ke Ukraina pada tahun 2022 memengaruhi akses Finlandia ke NATO. Studi-studi terdahulu telah menyoroti geopolitik perbatasan, memori historis, atau opini publik, namun kurang memberikan perhatian pada bagaimana faktor-faktor tersebut berkonvergensi dalam sebuah perubahan kebijakan yang utuh. Dengan menggunakan Regional Security Complex Theory dan konsep kepentingan nasional, artikel ini membedakan antara kondisi pemungkin jangka panjang, kemerosotan keamanan Eropa Utara pasca-2014, dan invasi sebagai pemicu langsung. Penelitian ini menerapkan desain studi kasus kualitatif yang berlandaskan pada dokumen resmi Finlandia dan NATO, data jajak pendapat, literatur akademik, serta media yang kredibel sebagai rujukan kronologi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa invasi tersebut tidak menyebabkan keretakan mendadak dengan kebijakan keamanan Finlandia sebelumnya. Invasi tersebut secara signifikan mempercepat transformasi yang telah berlangsung lebih lama dalam kebijakan non-blok militer, dengan mengubah cara para aktor politik Finlandia dan sebagian besar publik memaknai ancaman regional, kedaulatan, dan nilai pertahanan kolektif berbasis perjanjian. Akses NATO, dengan demikian, merupakan pilihan politik yang kontingen dan diambil dalam kondisi keamanan yang telah berubah, bukan sekadar respons otomatis terhadap faktor geografi atau kekuatan Rusia.

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INTRODUCTION

Finland's accession to NATO after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is the central issue examined in this article. The case is important because it marks one of the most consequential shifts in Northern European security since the end of the Cold War (Bond & Scazzieri, 2022). Finland moved from a long-standing policy of military non-alignment to full NATO membership on 4 April 2023, extending NATO's collective-defence frontier along Russia's north-western border (NATO, 2023). This shift matters academically because it provides a clear case of how a small state revises its alliance policy when a regional security order is disrupted by war. It also matters practically because Finland's accession altered the strategic geography of the Nordic-Baltic region and strengthened NATO's northern flank (Bond & Scazzieri, 2022).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 forced European states to reassess assumptions that had guided the post-Cold War order. The invasion did not merely continue the conflict that began with the annexation of Crimea in 2014. It demonstrated that large-scale conventional force remained available as an instrument of Russian statecraft (Bellinger, 2022). For states located near Russia, especially in the Baltic and Nordic regions, the war weakened confidence that interdependence, routine diplomacy, and institutional cooperation could contain territorial coercion. Deterrence and collective defence therefore returned to the centre of European security politics (Bond & Scazzieri, 2022).

Finland was especially exposed to this strategic change. It shares a land border of roughly 1,340 kilometres with Russia and occupies a sensitive position between the Baltic Sea, the Arctic, and the approaches to St. Petersburg. The Finnish-Russian border has long functioned as a marker of territoriality and geopolitical sensitivity rather than as a merely administrative line (Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2022). Finland's northern location also gives it strategic relevance in the Arctic and sub-Arctic environment, where military mobility, logistics, and resilience carry particular importance (Braw, 2021). Russian military modernisation around Kaliningrad added another layer of concern to the wider Baltic security environment (Dyner, 2018). The Russia-Ukraine war therefore resonated in Finland not as a distant European crisis, but as evidence that a neighbouring great power was again prepared to use force against a sovereign state (Bellinger, 2022).

Before 2022, Finland's policy was commonly described as military non-alignment. This refers to remaining outside a formal military alliance while maintaining strong national defence and practical Western cooperation. It differs from strict neutrality, which denotes a legal and political position toward armed conflict; alliance policy concerns formal defence commitments, while strategic autonomy refers here to Finland's capacity to choose its own security arrangements. This policy had deep historical roots in Finland's experience of war, survival, and constrained autonomy beside Soviet power (Suchoples, 2023). The Winter War of 1939-1940 and the Continuation War of 1941-1944 left a durable security memory in which sovereignty was preserved through preparedness, sacrifice, and careful judgement (Hannikainen, 2020). During the Cold War, Finland retained democracy, a market economy, and Western links while avoiding steps that Moscow could interpret as hostile, a balancing act often described as Finlandisation (Petersen, 1991). After the Soviet Union collapsed, Finland regained wider room for manoeuvre in foreign and security policy and deepened cooperation with Western institutions, yet it still did not seek NATO membership (Kansikas, 2019). By the early twenty-first century, Finland's position was therefore not strict neutrality in the older sense, but a carefully managed non-alignment supported by strong national defence and broad Western interoperability (Suchoples, 2023).

Previous scholarship offers important explanations of this shift, but it also leaves unresolved issues. Åtland (2016) showed that the 2014 Ukraine crisis had already changed security debates in Northern Europe and encouraged closer defence cooperation among Nordic and Baltic states. Prokkola and Ridanpää (2022) examined the Finnish-Russian border as a site

where territoriality and geopolitical meaning were being reconstructed. Suchoples (2023) placed contemporary Finnish security policy within the longer shadow of Russian and Soviet power. Forsberg (2024) demonstrated that the post-2022 NATO debate cannot be understood without the rapid movement of Finnish public opinion. These studies are valuable, yet they tend to emphasise one dimension of the case, such as regional defence, border geopolitics, historical memory, or public opinion. Less attention has been given to how these dimensions converged and how Finnish political actors translated them into a formal alliance decision after February 2022.

The novelty of this article lies in its integrated explanation of Finland's completed accession to NATO. It examines the 2022 invasion not only as an external shock, but as a catalyst that altered how Finnish actors assessed geography, historical memory, public opinion, and strategic interest. Regional Security Complex Theory is used to explain why Russian military action in Ukraine carried particular weight for Finland as a neighbouring state within a shared security environment (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The concept of national interest is used to explain how Finnish decision-makers justified NATO membership as an instrument for protecting sovereignty, territorial integrity, democratic autonomy, and national continuity (Morgenthau, 1978).

The research question is: how did Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine influence Finland's decision to join NATO? The article argues that the invasion was the decisive accelerating trigger in a longer security-policy trajectory, not its sole cause. Strong territorial defence, Western interoperability, and growing cooperation with NATO constituted enabling conditions; the 2014 Crimea crisis intensified regional concern; and the 2022 invasion changed elite and public interpretations of the likelihood and consequences of coercion (Åtland, 2016; Forsberg, 2024). These interpretations changed the perceived balance among available options and enabled political consensus around accession. The significance of the case lies in showing that alliance change is produced by the interaction of regional structure, historical interpretation, domestic legitimacy, and institutional opportunity rather than by material threat alone.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX AND NATIONAL INTEREST

Regional Security Complex Theory offers a useful lens for explaining why some threats carry greater weight for neighbouring states than for distant actors. Buzan and Wæver (2003) conceptualise a regional security complex as a group of units whose central security processes are too interdependent to be examined separately. Threats generally travel more intensely over short distances, although proximity acquires significance through rivalry, historical memory, and institutional alignment (Kelly, 2007; Lake & Morgan, 1997; Lemke, 2022). Walt's balance-of-threat argument supports this emphasis by identifying proximity, offensive capability, and perceived intention as components of threat assessment (Walt, 1987). It is used here as a supporting proposition, not as a separate operational framework. Finland was neither attacked nor a party to the war in 2022, but Russian military conduct affected how Finnish actors interpreted their regional security environment (Bond & Scazzieri, 2022; Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2022).

The first RSCT variable used here is boundary. Boundary refers to the spatial and political limits that make one security complex more internally connected than externally connected (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Geography provides the empirical context of Finland's long border with Russia and its Baltic-Arctic location; boundary describes the relational effect of that context, namely the concentration of interdependent security concerns within Northern Europe. The border does not itself determine policy. Its political significance is visible in official and public interpretations connecting Russian conduct in Ukraine with Finland's own security environment (President of the Republic of Finland, 2022; Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2022).

The second variable is anarchy. In an international system without a higher authority able to guarantee survival, states must rely on their own capabilities and, when necessary, on alliances (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Finland's strong national defence remained important after 2022. The analytical issue is therefore not an objective absence of protection, but the Finnish Government's reassessment of whether national preparedness without treaty-based collective defence remained adequate under changed conditions (Finnish Government, 2022a, 2022c).

The third variable is polarity, or the distribution of power in the regional security environment. Finland has considerable defence capacity, including conscription, reserves, territorial defence experience, and high societal resilience (Braw, 2021). Russia, however, remains a much larger military actor with nuclear forces, long-range strike systems, and the capacity to concentrate pressure in its neighbourhood (Dyner, 2018). This asymmetry constituted a material condition; its policy effect depended on how Finnish actors interpreted the intentions associated with those capabilities after February 2022.

The fourth variable is social construction. Threats do not speak for themselves; they are interpreted through history, identity, discourse, and patterns of amity and enmity (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Finnish understandings of Russia have been shaped by war, post-war constraint, pragmatic coexistence, and cautious adaptation (Suchoples, 2023). The 2022 invasion gave these experiences renewed political salience, as elite statements and public debate increasingly framed Russian coercion as relevant to Finland's sovereignty and freedom of alignment (Finnish Government, 2022b; Forsberg, 2024).

The concept of national interest connects threat perception to policy choice. Morgenthau treats national interest as the minimum requirement of the state to protect its physical, political, and cultural identity against external interference (Morgenthau, 1978) (Morgenthau, 1978). These interests are not treated here as self-evident instructions. The analysis examines how Finnish decision-makers identified what was threatened, what had to be protected, and which policy they considered appropriate. In the Finnish debate, these concerns were articulated through sovereignty, territorial integrity, democratic autonomy, and the freedom to choose national security arrangements (Finnish Government, 2022a, 2022c).

Table 1. Analytical Operationalisation

Analytical element	Distinct analytical function	Observable evidence in Finland
Boundary	Relational concentration of interdependent security concerns within a region; distinct from physical geography itself.	Official and public statements linking Russian conduct in Ukraine to Finland's border, Baltic-Arctic position, and regional security.
Anarchy	Absence of an overriding authority able to guarantee state security.	Government reassessment of the adequacy of national defence without treaty-based collective guarantees.
Polarity	Distribution of material capabilities among regional actors.	Comparison between Finland's defence capacity and Russia's larger conventional, nuclear, and long-range capabilities.
Social construction	Political interpretation of material conditions through history, identity, discourse, and patterns of amity and enmity.	Elite statements, polling, and public debate that attributed new meaning to Russian conduct after February 2022.
National interest	Politically articulated judgement about what must be protected and which policy best serves that purpose.	Official justification of sovereignty, autonomy, territorial integrity, and the preference for NATO over alternative arrangements.

Source: compiled from Buzan and Wæver (2003), Morgenthau (1978), and NATO (2025).

The two frameworks perform different but connected tasks. RSCT identifies the regional conditions and interpretive processes through which Russia's invasion acquired salience for

Finland. The concept of national interest then explains how Finnish political actors translated that threat interpretation into a justification for policy choice. The proposed sequence is: pre-existing regional conditions and defence cooperation; the 2022 invasion as an external shock; historically and politically mediated threat interpretation; public and elite reassessment; and NATO accession as a contingent institutional response. This division of analytical labour prevents geography, military asymmetry, public opinion, or official discourse from being treated as a sufficient explanation on its own.

METHODS

This article uses a qualitative case-study design with a deductive analytical strategy to explain how Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine influenced Finland's accession to NATO. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research question concerns the interpretation of a historically specific policy shift rather than the measurement of a statistical relationship (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finland's foreign and security policy decision is the unit of analysis, bounded from Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 to Finland's accession to NATO on 4 April 2023 (Yin, 2018). The design is deductive in using RSCT and national interest to organise inquiry, but interpretive in examining how actors assigned meaning to threat, sovereignty, autonomy, and collective defence (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

Data were collected through document study. Primary sources were selected when they formed part of the decision sequence or publicly articulated Finland's security assessment: Finnish government reports, presidential and governmental statements, NATO documents, and polling releases. Secondary sources comprised peer-reviewed scholarship and policy research addressing Finnish-Russian relations, Nordic security, alliance policy, and public opinion. Reputable media were used only to establish chronology or contemporaneous public debate. Sources were included when their provenance was identifiable, their content related directly to the 2014-2023 policy trajectory or the bounded 2022-2023 decision period, and their claims could be compared with another source type.

Data analysis proceeded in three steps. First, qualitative content analysis identified passages concerning regional threat, historical memory, sovereignty, strategic autonomy, defence guarantees, public legitimacy, and policy alternatives. Coding was theoretically informed but did not treat the categories as predetermined findings: attention was given to the actor speaking, the context of the statement, and competing interpretations. Second, theoretically guided process tracing examined the sequence from pre-2022 defence cooperation and the post-2014 deterioration in regional security to the invasion, changes in public and elite interpretation, formal application, ratification, and accession. It also considered whether the timing was better explained by long-term NATO integration alone or by an elite-led decision largely independent of the post-invasion change in public opinion. Third, claims were triangulated across official documents, polling, scholarship, policy research, and media chronology to reduce dependence on any single institutional voice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Yeasmin & Rahman, 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Geographical Proximity and the Boundary of Finland's Security Complex

In RSCT, geographical proximity is not a background condition. It shapes the intensity with which threats are perceived and managed (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Finland's border with Russia concentrates its security concerns within the Northern European regional complex (Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2022), but the border does not itself determine policy. When Russia invaded Ukraine, the central issue for Finnish leaders was not an expectation of immediate attack. They interpreted the invasion as evidence that a neighbouring state was willing to revise the regional order by force (President of the Republic of Finland, 2022). The evidence therefore

supports boundary as regional connectedness rather than geography as an automatic cause of accession.

Before 2022, Finnish policy combined pragmatic coexistence, strong national defence, and extensive Western cooperation without formal alliance membership (Suchoples, 2023). Finland maintained strong military preparedness while growing interoperability and defence cooperation created the practical capacity for closer alignment. The 2014 Crimea crisis had already weakened confidence in the regional order and encouraged greater Nordic-Baltic defence cooperation (Åtland, 2016). The 2022 invasion did not create these conditions, but it led the Finnish Government to reassess whether they were sufficient without treaty-based guarantees (Finnish Government, 2022a, 2022b). Long-term integration therefore helps explain Finland's capacity to accede, but not the timing of the decision on its own.

Finland's Baltic and Arctic positions intensified the problem. The Baltic Sea had become more strategically charged after Russian military modernisation and the military role of Kaliningrad (Dyner, 2018). The Arctic had also gained strategic attention because of northern sea routes, energy, climate change, and military access (Prokkola & Ridanpää, 2022). Finland's accession therefore connected the defence of the Nordic region more tightly to NATO planning (NATO, 2023). These geographical conditions established exposure and interdependence; Finnish policy documents and political debate supplied the judgement that military non-alignment had become comparatively less protective.

The war in Ukraine also showed the practical relevance of distance. Russian missile and air capabilities made clear that proximity is not limited to land borders (Dyner, 2018). Russian force projection can affect the wider Baltic and Nordic environment, and Finland's air and maritime spaces cannot be insulated from a deterioration in Russia-West relations (Åtland, 2016). Boundary, then, refers to more than a line on the map. It denotes a security space in which Finland, the Baltic region, the Arctic, and Russia's western military posture interact.

Historical Memory and the Social Construction of Threat

The effect of the 2022 invasion cannot be explained by geography alone. Finland's reaction was also shaped by historical memory. RSCT's concept of social construction helps explain why Russia's actions carried particular meaning in Finland (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). The Winter War of 1939-1940 remained part of Finland's security memory because it linked sovereignty, territorial defence, and national survival. This memory did not establish permanent enmity or determine policy, but it provided an interpretive reference for evaluating coercion by a stronger neighbour (Hannikainen, 2020; Suchoples, 2023).

The Continuation War and the post-war settlement added further complexity to Finnish-Russian relations. Finland's later relationship with the Soviet Union was not simply one of hostility; it was also one of adaptation (Hannikainen, 2020). Finland avoided direct Soviet domination, kept democratic institutions, and maintained links with the West (Petersen, 1991). Yet it did so under constraints imposed by the regional distribution of power and by Moscow's security expectations (Kansikas, 2019). This history left a dual lesson: coexistence with Russia was possible, but only when Finland managed the balance between autonomy and pressure with great care.

After 1991, the disappearance of the Soviet Union opened a less constrained period. Finland entered the European Union, developed defence cooperation with Sweden and other Nordic partners, and became increasingly interoperable with NATO (NATO, 2023). Still, it avoided formal membership. The 2014 annexation of Crimea disturbed this equilibrium, but did not destroy it. Finland condemned Russian action and strengthened preparedness, yet public support for NATO membership remained below majority level (Forsberg, 2024).

The full invasion of 2022 removed much of the earlier ambiguity. Its scale, timing, and justification revived older fears about great-power coercion. Russian claims about preventing Western expansion and securing its sphere of influence resonated sharply in Finland because

Finland's own twentieth-century history had been shaped by that logic (Suchoples, 2023). The invasion supplied new evidence through which older memories were politically reinterpreted; it did not simply reactivate a fixed pattern of hostility.

Finnish leaders framed the invasion in terms that widened the referent object of security. President Niinistö and Prime Minister Marin condemned Russia's military action as not only an attack on Ukraine, but also an attack on the European security order (President of the Republic of Finland, 2022). Prime Minister Marin later argued in Parliament that Russia was seeking to build a sphere of influence in its neighbourhood (Finnish Government, 2022a). This framing connected Ukrainian sovereignty with Finland's own regional security concerns. It also helped translate historical memory into present policy. These statements are treated as evidence of the government's interpretation, not as proof that one response was inevitable.

The social construction of threat therefore changed. Russia had long been seen as difficult, powerful, and sometimes coercive. After February 2022, Finnish government statements, polling, and public debate more often presented large-scale coercion as relevant to Finland's own freedom of alignment (Finnish Government, 2022b; Forsberg, 2024). Within that discourse, military non-alignment was increasingly framed as exposure to risk rather than solely as an instrument of autonomy.

Public Opinion, Elite Consensus, and the Accession Process

The most visible domestic change after the invasion was the rapid movement of public opinion. Before 2022, Finnish support for NATO membership had usually remained within a minority range. Opposition to membership was durable, although not always deeply ideological (Forsberg, 2024). Many citizens accepted non-alignment as a practical and familiar position. NATO membership could be discussed, but it did not command a stable majority.

The invasion changed that pattern within weeks. Yle reported majority support for NATO membership at the end of February 2022, with 53 percent supporting an application (Yle, 2022a). In March, another Yle poll found support at 62 percent (Yle, 2022b). These figures were politically important because Finland's foreign and security policy has a strong consensus tradition (Forsberg, 2024). The public shift did not automatically produce accession, but it changed the political feasibility of the decision.

Elite opinion shifted in the same direction. Before the invasion, Prime Minister Sanna Marin had described NATO membership during her term as very unlikely (Reuters, 2022). After the invasion, Finnish leaders emphasised that the security environment had changed fundamentally. The Finnish Government's April 2022 report assessed the implications of the new environment and preserved Finland's freedom to apply for NATO membership (Finnish Government, 2022b). In May 2022, President Niinistö and Prime Minister Marin stated that Finland should apply without delay (Finnish Government, 2022c). The contrast indicates political reassessment rather than the execution of a settled pre-war decision.

The political sequence was unusually rapid. Finland and Sweden submitted their official letters of application to become NATO Allies on 18 May 2022. NATO Allies signed Finland's Accession Protocol on 5 July 2022. After ratification by existing members, Finland deposited its instrument of accession on 4 April 2023 and became the thirty-first member of the alliance (NATO, 2023). This sequence confirms that the transformation occurred at both the domestic and diplomatic levels.

From an RSCT perspective, the sequence shows how a regional shock can change the alliance orientation of a small state. Finland did not apply because it lacked national defence. Government documents instead judged that national defence and partnership no longer provided the same protection as treaty-based collective defence under the revised assessment of risk (Finnish Government, 2022b, 2022d). Public opinion supplied domestic legitimacy (Forsberg, 2024), political leaders converted that legitimacy into policy, and NATO provided the available institutional framework (NATO, 2025). The marked shift in both public and elite

positions after February 2022 is less consistent with a settled pre-war plan or an elite decision independent of public opinion.

Table 2. Finland's Movement from Non-Alignment to NATO Membership

Period	Main development	Implication for NATO membership
Before February 2022	Finland maintained military non-alignment while cooperating closely with NATO.	Membership remained possible but lacked stable majority support.
February-March 2022	Russia's invasion of Ukraine changed threat perception and moved public opinion toward NATO.	Membership became a politically feasible response to the changed interpretation of regional security.
April-May 2022	The Finnish Government assessed the changed security environment; the President and Prime Minister supported applying.	Government assessment and elite-public convergence enabled the decision to apply.
July 2022-April 2023	NATO Allies signed and ratified Finland's Accession Protocol; Finland deposited its instrument of accession.	Allied ratification completed Finland's contingent choice to enter treaty-based collective defence.

Source: compiled from Finnish Government (2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d), NATO (2023), Yle (2022a, 2022b), and Forsberg (2024).

National Interest, Article 5, and the Nordic Security Architecture

The final policy choice was justified through Finland's national interest. In Morgenthau's narrow sense, national interest concerns the protection of the state's physical, political, and cultural identity (Morgenthau, 1978). For Finland, the physical dimension involved territory and population. The political dimension involved sovereign decision-making and democratic autonomy. The cultural dimension included the long-standing national narrative of survival beside a stronger eastern neighbour (Suchoples, 2023). These interests did not prescribe NATO membership automatically. Finnish decision-makers interpreted the invasion as changing which institutional arrangement could best protect them (Finnish Government, 2022b, 2022d).

NATO's Article 5 offered a concrete institutional response. The principle of collective defence means that an armed attack against one ally is considered an attack against all allies. This guarantee does not remove all security risks. It changes the strategic calculation of an adversary by raising the expected cost of aggression (NATO, 2025). For Finland, this was the central difference between close partnership and full membership. Partnership delivered interoperability, exercises, and political consultation. Membership added treaty-based collective defence. The Finnish Government presented this guarantee as stronger protection, rather than the analysis treating it as proof that membership was objectively necessary.

Three broad alternatives remained politically conceivable in 2022: continued military non-alignment backed by strong national defence, deeper Nordic or bilateral defence cooperation, and NATO membership. The European Union offered solidarity mechanisms, while Nordic cooperation and partnership with NATO supported preparedness and interoperability (Åtland, 2016; Bond & Scazzieri, 2022). These arrangements were not irrelevant or irrational. The Finnish Government nevertheless judged that they lacked NATO's established collective-defence commitment and integrated planning, and Sweden's parallel application reinforced the perceived regional advantages of membership (Finnish Government, 2022d; NATO, 2023).

Finland's accession also changed the Nordic security architecture. Before 2022, the region was divided between NATO members and militarily non-aligned states (Åtland, 2016). Finland's accession moved the Nordic region toward a more coherent Atlantic defence framework (NATO, 2023). The change strengthens NATO's northern flank, but it also makes

Finland part of the alliance's strategic geography. Finland receives collective defence while also contributing forces, territory, resilience, and regional expertise to the alliance.

There are costs and risks. Russia condemned Finland's decision and signalled that it would adjust its military posture in response (Roth, 2022). NATO accession therefore does not eliminate tension. It changes the structure of deterrence. Finland is no longer a non-aligned neighbour facing Russia mainly through national defence and EU solidarity. It is a NATO ally whose security is linked to the wider alliance.

The key transformation was therefore a politically contested redefinition of risk. Before 2022, a prominent concern was that joining NATO might provoke Russia (Forsberg, 2024). After the invasion, government assessments and a growing public majority assigned greater weight to the risk of remaining outside treaty-based collective defence (Finnish Government, 2022b; Weckman, 2023). NATO membership consequently moved from a contested possibility to the preferred option of political leaders and much of the public. This was a change in judgement under uncertainty, not evidence that accession was the only rational response.

This change clarifies the relationship between non-alignment and autonomy. Non-alignment had once helped Finland preserve autonomy under difficult conditions (Petersen, 1991). In 2022, Finnish decision-makers argued that access to formal collective-defence guarantees would better protect the same objective of sovereign democratic choice (Finnish Government, 2022b, 2022d). Finland's decision was not a rejection of historical prudence. It was a continuation of the same strategic purpose under altered regional conditions.

CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine war of 2022 had a decisive influence on Finland's accession to NATO. It transformed Finland's regional threat environment, reactivated historical memories of coercion, shifted public opinion, and changed elite calculations of national interest. The invasion did not act as the sole cause of accession. Finland entered the crisis with strong territorial defence, extensive Western interoperability, and a security debate already affected by Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The war decisively accelerated this longer transformation by changing how Finnish political leaders and much of the public assessed the available security arrangements.

Finland's geography made Russian behaviour immediately relevant to its security. As a state sharing a long border with Russia, Finland could not treat the invasion of Ukraine as a distant crisis. The war demonstrated that territorial coercion remained an instrument of power in Europe. For Helsinki, this altered the meaning of military non-alignment. A policy that had offered flexibility, caution, and room for diplomatic manoeuvre was increasingly assessed by Finnish decision-makers as less sufficient under the changed security conditions. Finland's location between the Baltic Sea, the Arctic, and Russia's north-western strategic space meant that a major deterioration in Russia-West relations would directly affect its own security environment.

History also shaped how the war was interpreted. Finnish society and political leaders did not view Russia's invasion only through the immediate events of 2022. They understood it against a longer background of Finnish-Russian relations, including the Winter War, post-war constraints, Cold War Finlandisation, and the shock of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. These memories did not mechanically determine policy or establish permanent enmity, but they gave particular meaning to Russia's actions. The invasion renewed the political relevance of Finland's historical caution toward Russian power.

The war also changed domestic politics. Before 2022, NATO membership had remained a contested option rather than a settled national project. After the invasion, public opinion moved rapidly in favour of accession, and political elites adjusted their positions accordingly. This convergence between public sentiment and elite consensus was crucial. Continued military non-alignment, deeper Nordic or bilateral cooperation, and reliance on national

defence remained conceivable alternatives. NATO membership became politically legitimate because Finnish leaders and much of the public came to view its treaty-based collective defence as the preferable means of protecting sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democratic autonomy.

The case contributes to broader debates on alliance politics and small-state security. It supports RSCT's argument that neighbouring states' security concerns become regionally interlinked, while showing that proximity and polarity do not mechanically determine policy. Material conditions became politically consequential through historical memory, official framing, public opinion, and institutional interpretation. The concept of national interest complements RSCT by explaining how Finnish actors translated these interpretations into claims about what had to be protected and which institutional response they preferred. Finland's accession therefore combined continuity in the objective of protecting sovereign autonomy with change in the means used to pursue it.

The study is limited by its reliance on public documents, published polling, and secondary scholarship. These sources reveal official justification and observable public change but cannot fully reconstruct confidential deliberation, intraparty disagreement, or the views of citizens who opposed accession. The bounded single-case design also limits generalisation to other non-aligned states. Further research could compare Finland with Sweden, examine parliamentary and party-level contestation in greater depth, or assess whether the meanings attached to threat and national interest changed after membership. Finland's accession is therefore best understood as a contingent political outcome in which a regional shock activated long-term preparedness and historically informed concern, while public and elite interpretation made alliance membership appear more protective than the available alternatives.

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