



Breaking Neutrality

A Study of Sweden's Decision to Join NATO

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Abstract

For over two centuries, Sweden has maintained a policy of non-alignment. This tradition broke on May 18, 2022, when Sweden applied for NATO membership. According to the government, the membership was seen as essential for protecting Sweden due to the worsening security situation caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Nonetheless, this raises a critical question: Given that Sweden has faced similar crises historically without turning to NATO, why choose to do so now? By conducting a descriptive ideal-type analysis based on the theoretical concept of strategic culture, this thesis argues that Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership was primarily driven by a series of external pressures and shifts in the regional security landscape. More specifically, the decision was influenced by the exposure of Sweden's inadequate defense capabilities in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Finland's concurrent shift towards NATO. Crucially, this strategic shift to join a military alliance does not reflect a change in Sweden's underlying strategic culture. Instead, it marks a pragmatic evolution in Sweden's defense strategy, responding to new challenges while upholding its foundational values to ensure both national and regional stability amid global uncertainties.

Keywords: NATO, foreign policy, security policy, strategic culture, strategic behavior, Sweden.

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	5
1.1	Background and Research Problem	5
1.2	Aim and Research Question.....	6
1.3	Delimitations.....	7
1.4	Disposition	8
2	Previous Research	9
2.1	Small State’s Alliance Policy.....	9
2.2	Sweden’s Historical Experiences.....	10
2.3	Swedish NATO Membership.....	12
2.4	Research Gap	13
3	Theoretical Framework	14
3.1	The Strategic Culture Debate.....	14
3.1.1	Change Within Strategic Culture	16
3.2	Swedish Traditional Strategic Culture as the Ideal Type.....	17
3.2.1	Level of Ambition.....	17
3.2.2	Foreign Policy Orientation.....	18
3.2.3	Core Tasks of the Armed Forces	19
3.2.4	Willingness to Use Military Force.....	20
3.2.5	Dominant Threat Perception(s).....	20
3.2.6	Strategic Partners	21
4	Methodology.....	22
4.1	Research Design.....	22
4.2	Descriptive Idea Analysis	22
4.2.1	Ideal Types as Analytical Tools.....	23
4.3	Material	24
4.4	Operationalization.....	25
4.5	Methodological Limitations and Challenges	26
4.1	Reflexivity.....	27
5	Empirical Analysis	28
5.1	Promote International Peace and Security	28
5.1.1	Summary	29
5.2	The Importance of the EU and NATO.....	30

5.2.1	Summary	32
5.3	Protect Sweden and International Peace	32
5.3.1	Summary	34
5.4	Humanitarianism.....	34
5.4.1	Summary	35
5.5	Russia as a Perceived Threat.....	36
5.5.1	Summary	37
5.6	Uphold the Relationship with Finland and the U.S.	38
5.6.1	Summary	39
6	Discussion	40
7	Conclusion	46
7.1.1	Contribution, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research.....	47
8	Bibliography.....	49
8.1	Literature.....	49
8.2	Empirical Sources	53

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Research Problem

For over two centuries, Sweden has upheld a policy of military non-alignment, firmly embedding this principle at the heart of its foreign and security policy (Westberg 2016: 411-412; Edström & Westberg 2023: 757; Westberg 2021: 133). By consciously steering clear of military alliances, Sweden has sustained a position that allows for the provision of impartial diplomatic solutions, thereby making a substantial and consistent contribution to international peace initiatives. This approach has enabled Sweden to navigate the intricacies of international politics while maintaining a unique stance that emphasizes peace over confrontation and alliance-based politics (Dalsjö 2015: 165; Westberg 2016: 413; Petersson 2015: 211-212).

Surprisingly, Sweden's longstanding tradition of military non-alignment reached a turning point on May 18, 2022, when the government, along with Finland, submitted a formal application for full membership in NATO (The Swedish Parliament 2023). The Swedish government justified this dramatic action as the most effective way to ensure national security following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Forsberg 2023: 89, 94), a rationale that has been supported by several scholars (Forsberg 2023; Lundqvist 2022). The issue with this justification is that Russia has previously acted aggressively in Europe without Sweden seeking alliance membership. Two historical examples are Russia's war against Georgia in 2008 and the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Forsberg 2023: 89, 94). Why did Sweden choose not to join the alliance then?

Much of the previous research on small states' defense strategies and their reasons for joining military alliances is rooted in realism, a theory that underscores the importance of state power and security in an antagonistic international environment (Waltz 1979; Rickli 2008; Walt 1987). In line with realist assumptions, small states are often considered to have a limited range of foreign policy strategies: either to declare neutrality in the hope that greater powers

will respect this or to seek protection by joining an alliance (Rickli 2008: 307; Beyer & Hofmann 2011: 287). Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership in 2022 has been explored by several researchers through this lens – as an attempt to ensure state survival by enhancing military capabilities and allying with more substantial power blocs to increase its own security (Forsberg 2023; Lundqvist 2022).

This thesis argues that traditional realism-based assumptions do not fully account for the recent shift in Swedish foreign and security policy, which is a gap that this thesis aims to fill. While rational realist tenets may provide some insight into the situation, it can be argued that they cannot fully grasp the intricate context in which political decisions are shaped (Ångström & Honing 2012). For example, Erik Ringmar (1996: 33) has argued that the rationalistic notion of policymakers making calculated choices based on expected gains and losses in relative power is insufficient to understand a state's strategic behavior. Referring to John Steinbruner, Ringmar points out that a rational actor cannot manage such complex situations (*ibid.*). Additionally, Waltz (1979) also asserts that realism functions best as a general theory and is less effective in individual cases, such as within this thesis.

Against this background, this thesis will instead draw on the concept and theory of strategic culture, which offers a broader and more multifaceted tool for understanding small states' defense strategies, specifically of Sweden. By applying strategic culture, we can examine how historical, cultural, social, and political factors shape a nation's unique approach to security. Such an approach allows us to place Sweden's security policy choices and actions within a context that reflects the country's domestic values, experiences, and identity (Doeser 2017: 743; Biehl et al. 2013: 10).

1.2 Aim and Research Question

This thesis aims to investigate and describe the ideological factors and strategic considerations that led to Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership in 2022. To achieve this, a descriptive ideal-type analysis based on the theoretical concept of strategic culture will be conducted. The analysis is designed to scrutinize the empirical data, encompassing the January 1 to June 30, 2022, timeframe. The investigation will employ the analytical tools of “ideal types” grounded in prior research on traditional Swedish strategic

culture. This approach facilitates a coherent depiction of any potential transformations within Swedish strategic culture.

The empirical material will consist of texts from this specific timeframe, such as official government documents, reports, and national defense and security strategies that were active. The aim is to identify and illuminate the cultural factors and patterns that have influenced Sweden's decision-making process during this critical period. In pursuit of this aim, the thesis seeks to answer the following question:

- How can Sweden's strategic culture help us understand the government's decision to apply for NATO membership in 2022?

1.3 Delimitations

This thesis is delimited to understanding Sweden's decision to join NATO, explicitly focusing on Sweden's strategic culture. Potential reasons for the decision that do not align with the theoretical framework will not be addressed. The choice to exclusively examine Sweden's decision to join NATO is based on the vision to produce an in-depth analysis. However, many scholars have argued that Sweden and Finland influenced each other's decisions to join NATO and, therefore, need to be analyzed together to understand the reasons for such a political shift. The reason not to conduct a comparative analysis of Sweden's and Finland's decision to join NATO is based on the assumption that it does not provide sufficient room to delve as deeply into the research problem as an internal investigation requires.

The empirical material for this study is limited to the period from January 1 to June 30, 2022. This specific timeframe was carefully chosen to include as broad a spectrum of events and viewpoints as possible while keeping the timeframe as narrow as possible. During these six months, the security policy landscape in Northern Europe underwent drastic changes, including Sweden's path from initially not considering NATO membership to ultimately deciding to apply for it. The timeframe captures the evolving positions of the Swedish government that reflect significant dynamics in the nation's defense and security strategy. The selection of this period is motivated by the intention to analyze a concentrated yet eventful and pivotal phase in Sweden's political history. While I recognize that historical experiences

likely influenced Sweden's decision in various ways, the empirical analysis will be contextualized with existing research on traditional Swedish strategic culture. Consequently, examining these six pivotal months is deemed sufficient to analyze such changes thoroughly.

1.4 Disposition

The following chapter consists of previous research on why Sweden chose to apply for NATO membership, focusing on Swedish history and small-state alliance policy. This chapter is followed by a deeper presentation of the theoretical framework of strategic culture and how it can be used to understand changes in strategic behavior. The fourth chapter consists of the thesis' methodology, including a presentation of the method, material, and how to conduct the research in relation to the theory. The thesis then proceeds into the analysis, investigating how Sweden's strategic culture may have influenced the decision to join NATO. Lastly, the two concluding chapters discuss the empirical result compared to the ideal types based on previous research on Swedish strategic culture and answer the research question.

2 Previous Research

2.1 Small State's Alliance Policy

The relatively recent application of Sweden for NATO membership has resulted in limited published research on the subject. Therefore, it is particularly important to initially place the decision in a broader context – why small states choose to join alliances. The difference between small states and great powers was made clear early in history. In the period after the Napoleonic Wars, small states were regarded by great powers as actors who switched sides in wars as fortunes changed. They were also considered to lack the resources and will to take responsibility for fulfilling the agreements made after the war was over. In this research, small states are defined as “a state that is aware that it cannot achieve security primarily through its own capabilities” and therefore “must rely on assistance from other states, institutions, processes, and [general security policy] developments [...]”¹ (Rothstein 1867: 29; Westberg 2016: 421).

As previously mentioned, the majority of previous research on small states' alliance politics is based on the theoretical foundations of realism. Small states reflect a profound navigation through the strategic dilemmas they face in the global system, where the principles of balance of power and the strategic choices between “balancing” and “bandwagoning” are central components (Walt 1985: 4-5). The concept of “balance of power” is fundamental for understanding the alliance politics of small states and aims to prevent a single state or a coalition of states from dominating the international system (Westberg 2016: 417-418). When it comes to small states' strategies for creating a balance of power, they often face the choice of using the strategy of “balancing” or “bandwagoning”. Balancing means that a state cooperates with other states against a joint threat, and bandwagoning means that a state allies with the enemy. Balancing involves small states actively participating in creating or maintaining a balance of power, which can offer a more sustainable and independent way to secure their security and interests (Walt 1985: 5-7). On the other hand, bandwagoning may

¹ The author's translation.

seem advantageous in the short term, where small states can directly benefit from the protection of a strong ally (previously enemy), but it can also entail a risk of excessive dependency or loss of independence. Walt's definition of the balance of power theory emphasizes that states' alliance choices are driven more by the perception of threat than by strength in conflicts. Instead of merely balancing against or aligning with the strongest powers, states base their decisions on who they see as the greatest threat. This perspective explains why even militarily weak states may choose to ally with a threatening great power if no other help is available, indicating that most states prefer to balance against perceived threats rather than seek an alliance with them (Westberg 2016: 418-419; Walt 1985: 33-34).

The formation of alliances for small states is, therefore, not just a reaction to immediate security threats but also a conscious strategic maneuver to actively influence and benefit from the global power structure. By skillfully balancing between bandwagoning with dominant powers and seeking balancing alliances, small states can work to maintain a degree of autonomy and independence while contributing to and benefiting from a more balanced and stable international order. This strategy reflects the constant endeavor of small states to maximize their influence and ensure their survival in an often unpredictable and competitive global landscape (Walt 1985).

2.2 Sweden's Historical Experiences

Sweden was a great power in Northern Europe between the 1600s and the early 1800s, engaging in several wars and conflicts, but after the loss of Finland to Russia in 1809, the era of great power came to an end (Engelbrekt 2015: 10; Westberg 2021: 89). The Treaty of Frederikshavn, as it came to be known, has been described as an example of an "external shock" that allowed for changes in Swedish security policy (Westberg 2021: 90). The definition of an external shock will be discussed in more detail in the theory-section. Moving on, the war against Russia has been noted as "the greatest disaster Sweden had encountered",² and for the remainder of the 19th century, Sweden adopted a more independent stance towards the great powers in Northern Europe (Westberg 2021: 90; Engelbrekt 2015: 10).

² The author's translation.

During the latter half of the 19th century, especially after Sweden's union with Norway in 1905, Sweden cemented its policy of non-alignment as a fundamental principle of its foreign policy. This policy aimed to maintain the country's neutrality in the event of war and to avoid binding military agreements that could draw the country into conflicts (Engelbrekt 2015: 10). In practice, this meant that Sweden maintained friendly relations with Russia and Great Britain and preserved its position as independent and neutral (Westberg 2021: 103).

During the Second World War, Sweden conducted its alliance policy cautiously, guided by the strong desire to maintain its neutrality and sovereignty. Although the principle of neutrality was strict initially the complex and changing situation led to adjustments (Westberg 2021: 167-169; Agius 2006: 78). The invasion of Denmark and Norway by Germany in 1940 is an example of an event that challenged Sweden's neutral stance. After many debates within the Swedish government, a transit agreement with Germany was signed, allowing them to transport materials and troops via Swedish railways between Finland and Norway, a compromise aimed at avoiding a similar occupation of Sweden and preserving the nation's independence (Westberg 2021: 170-175). Towards the end of the war, as the United States entered the conflict and Germany's position weakened, Sweden shifted its support and began assisting the Allied Western powers. Sweden denied the Germans further concessions and began allowing British planes to fly over Swedish territory on their way to Germany (ibid: 175-177).

Sweden's support for Germany during the Second World War faced harsh criticism, especially regarding whether the policy was truly consistent with the principles of neutrality. The government defended its decisions by arguing that they acted based on an overriding need to keep the country out of the direct impact of the war to secure Sweden's survival (Westberg 2021: 177-179). With its strategic location, squeezed between German and Soviet forces, Sweden faced a dilemma: either to face the risk of being occupied, knowing that its own military was insufficient for defense, or to make certain concessions to both sides. Ultimately, the neutrality policy fulfilled its primary purpose – to avoid participation in the war and protect Sweden's sovereignty (ibid: 179-180).

2.3 Swedish NATO Membership

A central part of the research on Sweden's application for NATO membership points to Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2022 as a decisive factor. For instance, Stefan Lundqvist (2022) and Tuomas Forsberg (2023) have highlighted how this event triggered significant concern over the security situation in Northern Europe and how Sweden experienced an increased need to seek protection under NATO's security umbrella. This view of increased Russian aggression as a direct catalyst for Sweden's application has been a recurring theme in the research.

Researchers such as Håkan Edström and Jacob Westberg (2023) emphasize that it was not only the direct threat from Russia that influenced the decision, but also broader changes in the international security order. They highlight that as the threat level dramatically increased and it became apparent that national resources were insufficient and necessary defense guarantees were lacking, the imbalance between goals, means, and methods became clear. There simply was no other immediate solution than to adjust external actions and apply for NATO membership (Edström & Westberg 2023: 757).

As Edström and Westberg (2023) highlight, another important part of the academic debate is Sweden's and Finland's parallel paths toward NATO. Research has shown that Finland's decision to apply for membership had a significant impact on the Swedish decision-making process, particularly considering the deep historical and security-political ties between the countries (Forsberg 2023).

Domestic political factors that played a role in Sweden's NATO application have also been discussed. Anna Wieslander (2022) has emphasized that Swedish domestic politics, including shifts in party positions and changes in public opinion, were important in shaping the decision. Throughout the 2000s, many Swedes supported NATO membership, although it never constituted a majority. This resistance to NATO and alliance membership altered in April 2022 when the figure escalated to 45 percent. In contrast, more than 60% of the Swedes, a majority for the first time, said they favored Swedish NATO membership if Finland chose to join the alliance. When the government decided to apply for membership in May 2022, more than 50% of citizens were in favor of membership (Forsberg 2023: 89-91; Ydén et al.

2019). This suggests that a combination of domestic political pressure and external security challenges drove Sweden's direction towards NATO (Wieslander 2022). Further domestic political factors as to why the decision was made are what this paper aims to contribute to the research.

In summary, previous research indicates that Sweden's application for NATO membership was the result of both reactions to external events and a gradual change in domestic political consensus. This thesis aims to further explore the domestic political factors that have played a central role in Sweden's process of joining NATO. To address this, the thesis will apply the theory of strategic culture. The next section will explore the meaning of strategic culture and how this theory can be used to analyze and understand Sweden's strategic behavior.

2.4 Research Gap

This thesis aims to complement previous realism-based research and explore how more domestic factors could have influenced the Swedish government's decision to join NATO. To achieve this, the theory of strategic culture will be applied. Unlike realism, which often focuses on state powers' rational and materially based decisions, strategic culture offers a more nuanced analysis that includes values, traditions, and historical experiences. By integrating strategic culture into the analysis, this thesis can provide a more comprehensive view of the factors influencing Sweden's path to NATO membership than previous research has offered, highlighting the limitations of an analysis based on realism. The concept of strategic culture will be presented in more detail below.

3 Theoretical Framework

3.1 The Strategic Culture Debate

The strategic culture theory is employed in the realms of security and war studies to understand strategic behavior and incorporate cultural considerations into the analysis of decision-making related to the use of force (Neumann & Heikka 2005: 6). Introducing a cultural perspective challenges predominant theories in war studies that rely on the assumption that actors act rationally and pursue interests primarily determined by material factors (Biehl et al. 2013: 10). There is a lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of strategic culture; however, the concept is categorized into four generations.

The first generation of strategic culture was minted by Jack Snyder in 1977 and was intended to challenge the dominant assumption that actors behave rational due to material factors (Snyder 1977: 8; Biehl et al. 2013: 10). Based on the assumption that states' policies have been developed in different historical and political contexts, he argued that rational behavior was based on strategic culture (Snyder 1977: 8). In the context of the Soviet Union's and the United States' nuclear strategies during the Cold War, Snyder defined *strategic culture* as “[...] the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other regarding nuclear strategy.” (ibid.). This definition sparked a significant and enduring debate that prompted scholars from various perspectives to weigh in (Doeser & Eidenfalk 2019).

One of the scholars which participated in the debate on strategic culture was Colin Gray (1999). Gray defined strategic culture as “socially transmitted ideas, attitudes, traditions, habits of mind, and preferred methods of operations that are more or less specific to a particular geographically based security community that has had a necessarily unique historical experience.” (Gray 1999: 51). Gray characterizes strategic culture as a reflection and an influencer of a nation's historical, geographical, and military experiences. This culture

shapes a country's self-perception, worldview, and security policy choices through deeply ingrained values, traditions, and symbols. While it is stable and rooted in a long history of continuity, which can make it resistant to change, Gray also highlights its dynamic aspect. Strategic culture can evolve and adapt in response to new experiences (ibid: 51, 68).

According to the second generation of scholars, strategic culture is used as a tool to make other states believe that their strategic behavior is aligned with the portrayed version of their strategic culture (Klein 1988: 138). This means that what countries publicly express might not be the whole truth, as their self-interest often plays a more significant role in their decisions than their strategic culture (Anand 2020: 198).

The third generation, emerging in the mid-1990s with scholars like Alastair Iain Johnston (1995), aims to develop falsifiable theories of strategic culture. Unlike the first and second generations, the third generation treats strategic culture as an independent variable, separated from material and non-cultural elements. It isolates strategic culture to examine whether it can be used to explain state behavior (Anand 2020: 198; Johnston 1995: 46). In this generation, strategic culture is not merely seen as a fixed set of values and norms transmitted through generations but rather as a living process continuously influenced by internal and external stimuli. This means that the culture is susceptible to change based on new experiences, technological development, international events, and changing threat perceptions.

The fourth generation of strategic culture takes on a more constructivist approach and presents a more dynamic framework than previous generations. According to Tamir Libel, prior generations fail to account for change in behavior (Libel 2020: 354). Libel builds on Alan Bloomfield's approach, approaching that one must consider the interplay and competition among various "sub-beliefs" within a nation's strategic consciousness to fully grasp strategic culture's influence on state behavior (Bloomfield 2012: 453). This view contends that these competing subcultures embody differing strategic preferences, and assumptions can shift in prominence depending on external and internal pressures, leading to changes in national strategic behavior (Anand 2020: 198).

The discussions on strategic culture reveal disagreements about its nature and role in shaping state behavior. Initially, Gray argues that strategic culture determines state behavior, a view criticized by Johnston for being overly deterministic and not allowing for other influences or

precise predictions. Johnston advocates for a research approach that separates cultural factors from other influences. Gray opposes this stance by emphasizing that culture is intrinsic to our understanding and cannot be detached from behavior. The generational debate further explores this by contrasting the view that strategic culture is static and enduring with the notion that it is dynamic and evolves with new experiences and challenges, suggesting a need for flexible approaches to understanding national security strategy (Libel 2020: 354; Anand 2020: 198).

3.1.1 Change Within Strategic Culture

In order to attempt to understand Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership, I will apply the fourth generation's definition of strategic culture. Traditionally, strategic culture is seen as something languid and challenging to change, but the fourth generation's view of the theory allows us to regard strategic culture as not entirely immutable, which is essential for analyzing change processes within a country's security policy (Lantis & Howlett 2013: 98–99). Through the analysis, I will look for key elements where Sweden's strategic culture has evolved or changed since the end of the Cold War. This is possible due to the thesis's ideal types.

Moving on the discussion about changes within strategic culture, scholars such as Biehl, Giegerich, and Jonas (2013: 12) argue that crises can significantly disrupt this traditionally perceived stability. Similarly, Gray (2007: 7) contends that disturbances like conflicts or wars can shift strategic culture. Furthermore, Westberg (2016: 439) describes these crises as critical junctures that disrupt established patterns of political behavior and can lead to fundamental changes in security policy. For example, Sweden's EU membership marked such a juncture, reshaping its security strategy. Beyond military defeats, shifts in security strategies can also stem from persistent failures to meet core objectives with traditional methods. External or strategic shocks – sudden, drastic changes in the security environment due to unforeseen events like military conflicts, terrorist attacks, or economic crises – further challenge existing strategies. These shocks often reveal deficiencies in security systems, necessitating immediate and perhaps extensive strategic reassessments (Gray 2014: 197-198; Edström et al. 2018: 1; Lantis & Howlett 2019: 99).

A critical juncture or external shock challenges the cultural and structural foundations of a nation's security strategy. This creates an opportunity for change, as crises generate the need for new strategies and create a willingness among decision-makers and the population to accept change. It can also alter the power dynamics within a state, where new actors with different perspectives can influence security policy. Change due to these phenomena often entails a rearticulation of the objectives and means in a nation's security strategy. It may also entail a reassessment of alliances and security partnerships (Gray 2014). Consequently, this study posits that despite its inherent stability, strategic culture is capable of evolving over time (Howlett & Glenn 2005: 131).

3.2 Swedish Traditional Strategic Culture as the Ideal Type

Based on a theoretical mix between Biehl et al. (2013), Doerer (2017), and Doerer & Eidenfalk (2019) understandings of strategic culture, and previous research on Swedish strategic culture, a unique theoretical framework consisting of six elements, or "sub-cultures" has been chosen to best fit the investigation of Sweden's decision to join NATO. These are "Level of ambition," "Foreign policy analysis," "Core tasks of the armed forces," "Willingness to use military force," "Dominant threat perception(s)," and "Strategic Partners." These theoretical sub-cultures will later on be developed, or operationalized, into different ideal types.

3.2.1 Level of Ambition

This indicator is borrowed from Biehl et al. (2013) and is intended to identify a state's primary objectives within the security realm and whether these objectives require passive indifference or active international leadership (Biehl et al. 2013:14). Since the Cold War, Sweden's foreign policy has focused on actively promoting international peace and security, playing a leading role, and taking responsibility for global issues (Ruffa 2013: 344-346). Active engagement in global peace and security is not just a gesture of selflessness and solidarity; it aligns with Sweden's self-interest. Such efforts raise Sweden's profile as a dynamic participant on the world stage and increase its chances of receiving aid when needed (Ångström 2015: 244, 248). Sweden has long been a prominent participant in UN

peacekeeping operations, contributing both financially and with personnel (Ruffa 2013: 344-346). After the Cold War, however, these peacekeeping efforts evolved into more peace-enforcing operations, as seen in Sweden's participation in the NATO-led operation in Kosovo (Dalsjö 2017: 12; Ångström 2015: 237).

Sweden's tradition of neutrality has gradually evolved into an identity where the country perceives itself as a moral guide for the world, contributing to a national self-image of being a positive international force or acting for the greater good (Ruffa 2013: 343; Dalsjö 2017: 10; Ångström 2015: 257). Despite the country's involvement in coercive measures, which may seem contradictory, it is important to note that a nation's strategic culture can encompass different "sub-cultures" that are not always aligned.

3.2.2 Foreign Policy Orientation

This indicator integrates insights from Biehl et al. (2013) as it seeks to pinpoint a state's position and its dynamics with European and transatlantic defense collaborations, such as the EU and NATO. It examines whether a country favors bilateral or multilateral pacts and the emphasis placed on such alliances (Biehl et al. 2013: 15). By analyzing Sweden's perspective on cooperation with international organizations such as NATO or the EU, one can understand how the country perceives its security and defense collaborations and whether it shows a preference for a particular forum for such partnerships.

The EU has long been considered the primary arena for cooperation, a role that was strengthened with the membership in 1995 (Westberg 2021: 214). Although Sweden has not become a full NATO member, it has moved closer to the alliance through partnership programs and contributions of troops to NATO-led operations, demonstrating a pragmatic security policy. Despite an official line of military non-alignment, Sweden's practical approach to NATO reflects a flexible and strategic attitude towards international defense and security cooperation, with a clear focus on the EU but without excluding close collaboration with NATO (Ruffa 2013: 349-350; Doeser 2016: 288-289).

3.2.3 Core Tasks of the Armed Forces

This indicator integrates insights from Biehl et al.'s (2013) and Doeser's (2017: 744) approach of strategic culture, which focuses on a state's military organization. The main issue to be discussed is what tasks are given priority in the armed forces. It also encompasses whether the state gives precedence to the protection of its own territories - that is, territorial defense – or whether it deems it more crucial to give precedence to engaging militarily on an international level, known as “expeditionary” defense (ibid.).

Regarding the role of the Swedish Armed Forces, during the Cold War, Sweden adopted a security strategy that combined a strong military with a firm neutrality policy. Although the country officially declared itself neutral, it heavily invested in building one of Europe's most powerful defense forces. The military investment included a comprehensive total defense strategy covering both military and civilian aspects to address potential threats. By focusing on strengthening conventional military capacity and guerrilla warfare capabilities, Sweden showed a clear readiness to defend its territory at all costs. Air defense and the navy became especially central to this defensive strategy, with their primary task being to protect the country's extensive coastline and airspace (Kronvall & Petersson 2012: 20-21; Jonter 1999: 11-12).

After the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, Sweden once again shifted its security strategy to adapt to a new international order. The focus moved from territorial defense to international cooperation and participation in international, or “expeditionary”, operations (Doeser 2016: 287; Kronvall & Petersson 2012: 87-88). Instead of protecting the individual state, the primary goal became improving international peace and security (Ruffa 2013: 344). Since the Cold War, Sweden has abolished conscription and participated in many UN-led and NATO-led operations (Ångström 2015: 238-239).

However, this security policy orientation underwent another shift. In the 2010s, national defense was given renewed priority due to gaps in self-defense capabilities. Sweden was deemed unable to withstand an enemy for more than a week before surrendering, which resulted in the so-called “Hultqvist Doctrine”. The doctrine focused on strengthening Sweden's national defense, closely cooperating with other countries, and supporting a security policy that respected each nation's right to self-determination. This doctrine

represented a balance between maintaining military independence and working closely with NATO and Western countries (Westberg 2023: 222, 235; Dalsjö 2015: 17, 23).

3.2.4 Willingness to Use Military Force

This indicator, adapted from Doeser (2017: 744), examines the specific purpose under which a country is prepared to deploy its military capabilities as a tool of its security policy. It also involves a critical examination of whether the use of military power is reserved solely for self-defense, responding to direct threats to the nation's sovereignty and safety, or whether it also encompasses the use of force in offensive capacities – potentially as a preemptive measure or to achieve strategic objectives beyond self-defense. This indicator also considers whether the state has taken on any ethical responsibility to employ or refrain from using military force in humanitarian operations (*ibid.*).

Sweden has clarified that it sees itself morally compelled to intervene for humanitarian purposes and eschews a neutral position in such circumstances (Ruffa 2013: 350; Ångström & Honing 2012: 679). Within the country, military intervention is recognized as a viable option for safeguarding civilian lives or preventing crimes against humanity (Ruffa 2013: 344). However, there is a strong preference for non-combative measures, which is reflected in Sweden's commitment to subtle diplomatic engagement (*ibid.*: 353). This practice of joining international missions driven by altruistic motives has become ingrained in Sweden's identity. However, it is not the functional aspect of the Swedish armed forces in these operations that is pivotal; instead, it is the expression of Sweden's inherent desire to contribute positively on the global stage (Ångström 2015: 258).

3.2.5 Dominant Threat Perception(s)

This indicator, derived from Doeser and Eidenfalk (2019), aims to identify the most severe threat(s) perceived by a state in the post-Cold War era. Enduring threats have the potential to become ingrained within a state's strategic culture, with elite members either deliberately instructed to adopt such perceptions or acquire them through emulation. These threats may originate from another state, a coalition of states, or non-state actors. Moreover, beyond identifying the threatening entity, the indicator also delves into delineating what necessitates safeguarding. This may involve protecting the state's own territory (including its population),

other territories, or globally recognized values such as human rights (ibid: 8). Thus, by studying Sweden's dominant threat perception, motivations for joining NATO can potentially be identified.

Swedish defense policy during the Cold War was guided by the principle of neutrality, focusing on countering threats from the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the military threat diminished, and Sweden's attention shifted to non-military threats such as terrorism, cyberattacks, and energy security, reflecting a new global security environment. Russia was still present as a threat, but the primary concern was instability within Russia. In recent years, particularly in light of Russia's increased military activity in the Baltic region, the military threat has again become more prominent in Swedish security policy (Westberg 2021: 223-224). According to Edström and Westberg's article "The limits of unity: consensus or confrontation in the shaping of Swedish defense policy" (2023),³ Russia's annexation of Crimea was the starting point for an increased perceived threat from Russia against Sweden (Westberg 2021: 225; Britz & Westberg 2015: 424).

3.2.6 Strategic Partners

Lastly, inspired by Doerer and Eidenfalk (2019), this indicator emphasizes the significance of strategic partners as they influence a state's strategic behavior. For instance, if a country's strategic partner is involved in a particular coalition, the likelihood that the specific state will also participate in the coalition increases. Furthermore, suppose the state's strategic partner leads the coalition, the probability is even higher that the state would opt to join the coalition (Doerer & Eidenfalk 2019: 8). For this reason, it is necessary to identify who, or which entities are the state's strategic partner or partners and, whether they are a part of a coalition.

Sweden's strategic culture has been characterized by its close cooperation with other countries, specifically noting that Sweden's close ties with Finland and the U.S. have held significant importance throughout history (Wither 2020: 73-74). However, it is worth noting that Sweden maintains a non-binding stance on defense obligations, meaning that despite declarations of solidarity, there is no mandatory military support required in case of an attack on a partner nation (Westberg 2023: 216). It is also important to note that Finland had not joined NATO before 2022 (Forsberg 2023).

³ The author's translation.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This thesis will adopt an interpretivist approach, where empirical material is analyzed through the lens of strategic culture. The analysis will be conducted using a descriptive idea analysis, where ideal types will form the central analytical tools. These ideal types are constructed from a combination of strategic culture theory and previous research on Swedish strategic culture. By applying these ideal types to the empirical material, the analysis will, in a clear manner, answer how strategic culture may have influenced Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership or if it deviates in any way from the theoretical framework. More specifically, the "empirical analysis" section aims to describe the source material based on the ideal types, while the "discussion" section interprets and draws conclusions based on the description of the material. This approach aims to offer a deeper understanding of how Swedish strategic culture may have influenced the country's security policy orientation in a time of global change and uncertainty.

4.2 Descriptive Idea Analysis

Descriptive idea analysis is a method in social science research that focuses on providing a detailed description and understanding of various ideas and ways of thinking. This form of analysis aims to clarify and systematize the content of ideas to provide a thorough understanding of the underlying values, norms, and assumptions that shape specific political, economic, or social phenomena. In descriptive idea analysis, the researcher highlights how ideas manifest in text, speech, or action and how they influence individual and collective decisions. The method involves mapping out and describing the structures of ideas in detail, often without necessarily aiming to test hypotheses or build theory. Instead, the goal is to increase understanding of how certain ideas affect and shape human perception and behavior within a specific area or context (Beckman 2005: 48-54).

Moreover, it is also important to highlight whether the thesis is primarily interested in the actors (e.g., politicians, political parties, newspapers, or authorities) presenting a political message (*actor-centered study*) or the arguments that take center stage (*idea-centered study*) (Beckman 2005: 17). Since this thesis primarily aims to investigate how strategic culture can be used to understand why the government chose to apply for NATO membership, this will be an idea-centered study. However, it is important to note that only the government's positions will be studied. Different parties have seen NATO as a crucial next step in Swedish security policy longer than others. The Social Democrats, who formed the Swedish government in the spring of 2022, were among the last parties to change their position. Examining all parties on equal grounds would have resulted in an unclear analysis and misleading results.

4.2.1 Ideal Types as Analytical Tools

When analyzing ideas or ideologies, two analytical tools can be used: ideal types and dimensions. Ideal types are theoretical constructs used to create simplified models of social phenomena, providing a pure basis for comparing and analyzing behaviors and processes. They are not intended as a description of how something actually is but rather serve as a reference tool to compare and understand real social phenomena by highlighting deviations and similarities to this idealized model. Ideal types are not meant to be accurate representations but theoretical constructs that help researchers focus on certain aspects of a phenomenon and understand its most significant characteristics (Bergström & Boréus 2005: 159-164). Dimensions, on the other hand, can be seen as different sides or components of a phenomenon, providing a framework for analyzing how these various parts interact with each other or contribute to the whole. Using dimensions allows researchers to explore more deeply and in detail how each part influences and shapes the overall phenomenon (ibid: 164-166).

This thesis will use ideal types as the analytical tool. By operationalizing strategic culture as an ideal type, deviations and similarities between the idealized model and Sweden's actual behavior can be clarified. This approach allows for effective analysis of which aspects of strategic culture are most prominent in decision-making and how these may differ from or align with cultural expectations. Thus, ideal types offer a more focused and concentrated method for understanding the cultural drivers behind Sweden's security policy decisions compared to broader and more multifaceted dimensions that may not directly capture the cultural nuances of a specific decision-making scenario (Bergström & Boréus 2005: 159-164).

Another purpose of using ideal types as an analytical tool is that they aim to bring together the components of an ideology to explain a phenomenon, which aligns well with the choice of theory. Ideal types are also described as “a concentration of the characteristics or ideas that the researcher believes to be particularly important in describing a phenomenon,” (Beckman 2005: 28)⁴ which matches the research design. The theoretical elements, which will be operationalized as the ideal types, have been selected because they are considered particularly significant for the research. There are several parts of strategic culture that could be relevant but will not be considered. These would be relevant to the research if the analytical tool of dimensions were chosen.

4.3 Material

The empirical material is derived from various primary sources, specifically focusing on official government documents, reports, and national defense and security strategies that were active from January 1 to June 30, 2022. These documents are sourced directly from credible and official online platforms, including the Swedish government’s website (regeringen.se) and the Parliament’s website (riksdagen.se), ensuring that the information is authoritative and directly relevant to the study. The decision to exclusively utilize primary sources is strategic and aims to minimize the influence of the researcher’s biases on the data collection process. Furthermore, the reliance on official documents is justified by their established reliability and trustworthiness, which is crucial for providing essential insights into the subject matter.

The empirical material underpinning this analysis was primarily sourced in Swedish, necessitating the translation of all quoted material into English for consistency and clarity. This step was necessary as most of the documents were not available in an English version; indeed, only one of the six reviewed documents was found in English. To maintain a uniform approach and facilitate a balanced analysis, Swedish sources were exclusively used. Ensuring that all material is presented in the same language is expected to enhance the fairness of the analytical process. The translations have been meticulously conducted, combined with personal translation efforts and the use of impartial linguistic tools, and have been cross-referenced with the available English-language document (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 8). This to ensure the highest fidelity to the original text. For the sake of brevity

⁴ The author’s translation.

and readability, it has opted not to note the translation after each quotation within the analysis, as this would be overly cumbersome and detract from the flow of the text.

4.4 Operationalization

The operationalization primarily aims to make the research question manageable for investigation. This is achieved by converting the norms embedded in the concept of Swedish strategic culture into operational definitions and then breaking down these definitions into relevant indicators (David & Sutton 2016: 186). In the process of operationalization, these indicators are reformulated into expressions to best uncover the core of the source material and thus identify, analyze, and understand the motivations presented (ibid: 266, 274-276). The ideal types are based on the theory of strategic culture and specifically on traditional Swedish strategic culture, as presented in the theory-section.

Table 1 - Operationalization of the theoretical framework

Theoretical element of strategic culture	Identified norms	Operationalizing expression
Level of ambition	Promote international peace and security	Sweden actively promotes international peace and security. Non-alignment serves Sweden well. Sweden is a moral guide and acts for the greater good.
Foreign policy orientation	Importance of the EU and NATO	The EU is considered the main arena for cooperation. Sweden contributes troops to NATO-led operations.
Core tasks of the armed forces	Protect Sweden and international peace	The role of the Swedish Armed Forces has shifted focus from territorial defense to international cooperation and then back to territorial defense.

Willingness to use force	Humanitarianism	Sweden justifies its use of force for humanitarian purposes.
Dominant threat perception(s)	Russia as a perceived threat	Sweden's primary threat(s) have been the Soviet Union and Russia.
Strategic partner(s)	Uphold the relationship with Finland and the U.S.	Sweden's close ties with Finland and the U.S. have held significant importance.

4.5 Methodological Limitations and Challenges

Critiques directed at interpretive research in general include concerns about its subjectivity and lack of transparency (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012: 79). However, it is essential to recognize that interpretive research designs are not expected to be entirely objective, as there is no absolute objectivity in the world (Bevir & Rhodes 2016: 11). According to interpretivists, the world needs to be understood from within, requiring the researcher to be a part of the research itself. This does not imply that it does not matter who interprets and understands. Indeed, the identity of those interpreting and understanding the empirics is relevant to the research, but it does not necessarily mean a decline in the study's quality (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012: 70).

This not only matters in the interpretation of empirical evidence but also in the selection of evidence. In the case of using official documents, debates, and politicians' statements as subjects of analysis, a significant challenge lies in determining which arguments hold greater or lesser importance (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012: 70, 80). Errors in interpretation within this context can have a substantial impact on the conclusions drawn (ibid.). To address the challenge of interpretation errors, it proves valuable to apply intertextuality, which means draw upon additional texts saying the same thing (Esaïasson et al. 2017: 308; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012: 87).

Interpretive researchers also need to be aware of the concept of "exposure" when conducting research. This means that research participants, such as politicians engaging in a debate or

writing a report, may behave differently depending on the environment and the audience. Depending on whom the participant is communicating with and the context surrounding them, influenced by their own “positionality”, the discourse can be affected. An interpretive researcher needs to be conscious of this and transparent about it. The correlation between mapping for exposure and intertextuality is intricately linked to epistemological presuppositions and assertions of knowledge. In essence, a broader map corresponds to a more diverse exposure, and a transparent account of these elements enhances the clarity of the researcher’s knowledge foundation, thereby bolstering the credibility of their claims (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012: 85-86).

4.1 Reflexivity

In conducting this analysis, I have remained acutely aware of my own “positionality” and background, maintaining transparency throughout (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012: 79-81). As the author of this study and someone raised in Sweden, I acknowledge that my views are deeply rooted in the Swedish context. This encompasses the narratives shaped by Swedish policymakers and media, which have influenced my perceptions of external threats and international relations throughout my life. Just as decisions are influenced by and, in turn, influence their surroundings, my environment also shapes my understanding. Recognizing these influences is crucial to my analysis.

5 Empirical Analysis

5.1 Promote International Peace and Security

In the 2022 Statement of Foreign Policy, published in February, it is emphasized that Sweden's security policy is characterized by continued military non-alignment combined with a defense policy based on two pillars: "enhanced national capability and deepened international defense cooperation" (Swedish Government 2022: 1). Regarding the militarily non-aligned stance, the statement makes it clear that the government does not intend to apply for NATO membership. Specifically, it states that "our military non-alignment serves us well and contributes to stability and security in Northern Europe." (ibid.).

Concerning the two defense policy pillars – enhanced military capability and deepened international defense cooperation – Sweden has, since 2014, established an effective defense policy network for security, entering approximately 30 agreements and around 20 cooperation treaties, particularly with its Nordic and Baltic neighbors. Sweden has improved its military capacity through collaboration with individual countries and with NATO. Additionally, Sweden has strengthened its domestic defense capability through the most extensive investment in Swedish defense since the 1950s (Swedish Government 2022: 1-2). During the parliamentary debate on February 24 (Swedish Parliament 2022a: 31), Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson stated that Sweden is currently carrying out "the most significant expansion of defense since the 1950s." By 2025, Sweden is expected to increase defense spending by 80 percent. Andersson also mentioned that conscription had been reintroduced as part of this expansion (ibid.).

As for the second of the two defense policy pillars – deepened international defense cooperation – Andersson spoke about cooperation agreements with different countries and organizations during the parliamentary debate on February 24 (Swedish Parliament (2022a: 35). Sweden has long been in partnership with NATO, and the government agrees that this partnership should continue to deepen. On February 24, the day Russia invaded Ukraine,

Andersson still asserted that the best way to secure Sweden is to “maintain a consistent and predictable security policy line” (ibid.), meaning continuing to remain militarily non-aligned.

On May 13, 2022, the government released the report “Deterioration of the security environment - implications for Sweden” (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022). The report consisted of an evaluation of the Swedish security situation in light of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and was authored by a working group established by the government. The group held six meetings with various invited experts in the field. While the report was not binding, it clearly outlined what the group considered the best decision for Sweden’s security: to strengthen national defense capabilities and defense and security cooperation (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 5-6, 41). However, in contrast to previous texts and statements from the government, it now stated that these goals are best achieved through Swedish NATO membership (Swedish Parliament 2022c: 1).

Given Sweden’s dual focus on strengthening national capability and deepening international defense cooperation, active engagement is required (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2022: 12, 31). Strengthening national capability involves proactively developing and modernizing its defense structures and capacities, which in itself is a form of active leadership, as it demonstrates a willingness to take responsibility for security and self-reliance. Deepening international defense cooperation requires Sweden to be an active and committed partner in dialogue and collaborative efforts. This can include initiating or participating in joint military exercises, contributing to international operations, developing cooperation agreements, and working with other countries to create a more cohesive and effective defense alliance (ibid: 31). Such an approach requires that Sweden not only participate but also actively contribute to and shape international security initiatives.

5.1.1 Summary

Between January 1 and June 30, 2022, Sweden’s primary objectives in the security realm were to strengthen national capability and deepen international defense cooperation. Sweden aimed to build the strongest defense in over 50 years while striving to maintain its military non-alignment. Given these goals and measures, Sweden’s approach clearly indicates a need for active international leadership. Actively engaging in defense alliances and participating in

international security exercises are actions that require Sweden to be a driving force in security policy work rather than a passive observer.

5.2 The Importance of the EU and NATO

In the February 2022 Statement of Foreign Policy, it is stated that “Sweden’s foreign and security policy is based on cohesion in the EU and increased cooperation on a broad front: in the Nordic region, the Baltic Sea area, through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and through a deepened partnership with NATO.” (Swedish Government 2022: 2). The statement also notes that Sweden will chair the EU for the third time in 2023, with an ambitious agenda (ibid.).

During the parliamentary debate on March 31 (Swedish Parliament 2022b: 38), Foreign Minister Ann Linde emphasized that Article 42.7 of the EU Charter cannot replace or be compared to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that:

An armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all, and consequently, the parties agree that each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the party or parties so attacked by taking, individually and in concert with the other parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. (North Atlantic Treaty Organization 2023)

However, Article 42.5 of the EU Charter states that “in the event of an attack on any of the EU member states, all other countries will participate in some way” (Swedish Parliament (2022b: 38). Participation is voluntary, but the article does not constitute a military defense guarantee (ibid.). Despite Article 42.5 not offering a defense guarantee, Defense Minister Peter Hultqvist stated in the same debate that “the government’s position is that military non-alignment remains” (ibid: 47).

In the report “Deterioration of the security environment - implications for Sweden” (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 17), it is mentioned that “the European Union is Sweden’s most important foreign and security policy arena” and that the EU’s importance to Sweden has been reinforced by the new security policy situation. However, it is also stated that it is

evident that the EU member states are not willing to develop a collective defense together (ibid: 8). For this reason, among others, it is argued that NATO should instead provide collective defense (Swedish Parliament 2022c: 1). Cooperation with NATO is described as having been strengthened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the Swedish Armed Forces, together with other international partners, have increased collaboration in the Baltic Sea region, particularly through joint exercises (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 22). When the report was published on May 13, 2022, Sweden and NATO had the status of Enhanced Opportunities Partners (EOP), a framework for an individually created partnership focused on training and exercises, political dialogue, and information exchange. At that time, the partnership was described as central to developing the Swedish Armed Forces' ability to withstand a potential attack (ibid: 29). Therefore, the cooperation is necessary to fulfill the first of the two defense policy goals - to strengthen national capability. The deepened collaboration since Russia's invasion of Ukraine is described to have included joint assessments of the security situation in the Baltic Sea (ibid.).

The report explains that this cooperation cannot continue in the same way it has since the 2016 Host Nation Support Agreement was established because NATO members will not tolerate protecting a state that is not a full member of the organization (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 32). The report states:

Article 5 has always only applied to the defense of the allies. During the war in Ukraine, the line of the U.S. and other allies has been to issue security guarantees only to NATO members. Thus, no individual NATO country has intervened militarily in Ukraine. It has been emphasized that there is no partner dimension to NATO's collective defense guarantees and deterrence. (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 32)

Additionally, the report highlights that Russia (or the Soviet Union) has never before attacked a NATO country. However, they have attacked a country outside the defense alliance (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 33). NATO is a central player in European and transatlantic security and has significantly contributed to various international crisis situations. As a member of the alliance, Sweden is described as being able to influence security policy discussions and decision-making within NATO (ibid: 39). This would allow Swedish interests and values to be prioritized to a greater extent.

The report portrays the EU as the most important political arena for Sweden. However, concerning defense guarantees, the EU cannot guarantee Sweden's security, as its member states will not agree on a commitment to military support for each other in conflict. "The best thing for our country's security is for Sweden to apply for NATO membership, and to do so now," (Swedish Parliament 2022c: 2) said Magdalena Andersson during the parliamentary debate on May 16, 2022. She argued that if Sweden were the only EU country in the Baltic Sea region not part of the alliance, it would have consequences (ibid.).

5.2.1 Summary

In the February 2022 Statement of Foreign Policy, the EU is portrayed as a central pillar of Sweden's foreign and security policy while emphasizing that cooperation with NATO has deepened following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although the EU is seen as an important political arena, the report "Deterioration of the security environment - implications for Sweden" (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 7) emphasizes that the EU does not offer a military defense guarantee like NATO's Article 5. Swedish NATO membership would give the country the opportunity to influence security policy decisions and contribute Swedish interests and values to international politics.

5.3 Protect Sweden and International Peace

Sweden's total defense had a primary objective between 2021 and 2025 (Swedish Government 2020a: 98-100) to strengthen the military defense and increase operational capability, according to the 2015 defense decision, which refocused defense on national tasks. The goal was to build a wartime organization capable of meeting an armed attack against Sweden and enhancing the overall capability of the total defense. Measures included organizing all parts of the Swedish Armed Forces into war units and increasing investments in equipment to create a robust and resilient wartime organization. This also involved increasing exercises and improving unit coordination to address potential armed conflicts and contribute to deterrence and peacekeeping. The Swedish Armed Forces also worked to enhance their ability to collaborate internationally, as shown by their participation in complex international exercises (ibid.).

Regarding the operational capability of the Swedish Armed Forces, their primary role is to protect Sweden from an armed attack and ensure the nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity in both times of war and peace. In the event of war, the objective is to immediately answer attacks, delay and prevent the enemy's establishment, and, if necessary, contest their operational control. Moreover, the Armed Forces must be able to mobilize the wartime organization without preparation, protect critical infrastructure and activities, and collaborate with other states and international organizations. In peacetime, their mission is to monitor and defend Swedish territory, assert the country's sovereign rights, contribute to international missions, and support civilian societal functions. The Armed Forces also strive to rapidly increase readiness during threats and gradually strengthen their operational capacity until 2030 (Swedish Government 2020b: 5-7).

In the report "Deterioration of the security environment - implications for Sweden" (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022) from May 2022, it is mentioned that "since 2015, the Armed Forces' capability has significantly increased [...]. In April 2022, the parliament decided that Sweden's defense capability should increase, and that the armament should take place faster" (ibid: 22). The April 13, 2022, amendment decision states that "Sweden's defense capability needs to be strengthened, and the military defense build-up should proceed faster than previously deemed necessary due to the deteriorating security situation in Sweden's neighborhood" (Swedish Ministry of Defense 2022b: 1-2). As a result, the Swedish Armed Forces were expected to increase the number of employed soldiers, sailors, and civilian specialists, acquire necessary equipment and ammunition, including anti-tank weapons, surface-to-air missiles, and air-to-air missiles, and improve mobility, protection, and firepower with new equipment such as tracked vehicles and coastal missiles. Additionally, infrastructural measures should be taken to maintain the performance of the equipment (ibid.).

Despite this domestically focused orientation, Sweden maintained its engagement on the international stage. This included continued participation in international operations, where Swedish forces contributed expertise and cooperation skills resulting from years of experience and training. In the regulatory letter for the fiscal year 2022 regarding the Armed Forces (Swedish Ministry of Defense 2022a), a large part of the material focuses on the Armed Forces' international military operations. Among other things, NATO's mission in Kosovo (KFOR), NATO's mission in Iraq (NMI), Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq, and

Operation UNIFIER in Ukraine are mentioned as essential operations to contribute to in 2022 (ibid: 5).

Sweden has had a long-standing mission to contribute military forces abroad. However, the government's proposition from 2020 makes it very clear what the defense is expected to focus on: "realign towards national tasks" (Swedish Government 2020a: 98). Another quote showing that the government has chosen to strengthen its national force is that "Basic training with conscription and refresher training has been reintroduced to create complete, jointly trained war units" (ibid.) and that "Sweden's national defense capability shall continue to be strengthened. We aim to reach 2 percent of GDP as soon as it is practically possible and no later than 2028." (Swedish Parliament 2022d: 2).

5.3.1 Summary

In summary, the role of the Swedish Armed Forces in the spring of 2022 demonstrated a strategic balancing act, where a strong national defense was considered fundamental to Sweden's sovereignty and security, while the country's international commitments and contributions to global security remained a crucial part of its defense identity. It is likely that the capacity of the Swedish defense forces had not been sufficiently strengthened to withstand an attack and protect both Sweden and international peace. This probable shortfall could be a key factor in understanding why the sudden decision to apply for NATO membership arose.

5.4 Humanitarianism

Sweden has traditionally been cautious in using military force and has a long history of military non-alignment. The use of military force would be justified within the framework of the country's defense and security policy, international law, and in accordance with the UN Charter. In practice, this means that military force would primarily be justified in self-defense if Sweden's territorial integrity or sovereignty is directly threatened or as part of an international peacekeeping operation sanctioned by the UN. In the government's proposition "Total defense 2021 - 2025" (Prop. 2022/21:30: 98), it is stated that "The military defense is designed and sized to be able to meet an armed attack against Sweden." Thus, the military defense is expected to be strong to serve a self-defense purpose.

According to the 2020 assessment by the Defense Committee, the Swedish Armed Forces “performed their tasks nationally and internationally with good quality” (Prop. 2022/21:30: 98). Therefore, it can be understood that the defense does not need to be strengthened for peacetime tasks. Defending Sweden from an armed attack is described as the primary task of the Armed Forces (ibid.). This has not been tested in recent history, as Sweden has remained out of conflict for around 200 years (Edström & Westberg 2023: 757). However, the government also emphasizes the importance of a solidarity security policy. Sweden’s 2009 Declaration of Solidarity expresses an expectation of mutual support between Sweden and other EU and Nordic countries in the event of disasters or attacks, meaning that Sweden will actively support these countries in such cases. On May 11, 2022, similar solidarity was formalized in a political declaration with the UK (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2022: 21).

Sweden has historically lacked binding defense commitments to other states as a militarily non-aligned country. Instead, it has strengthened its bilateral and multilateral defense partnerships and its national defense capabilities. This strategy signals an increased focus on collective defense and security through cooperation, which serves as a basis for justifying the use of military force in coordination with other countries, if necessary, especially for self-defense and supporting allies within established solidarity agreements (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 21).

5.4.1 Summary

Sweden, with its long history of military non-alignment, justifies the use of military force within its defense and security policy framework and international law. According to the proposition “Total defense 2021 - 2025” (2022/21:30: 98), the defense is designed to counter armed attacks against Sweden, indicating that military force would primarily be used in self-defense. The solidarity security policy is also emphasized, manifested in Sweden’s 2009 Declaration of Solidarity and the 2022 agreement with the UK, which includes mutual support in crises and attacks.

As a non-aligned country, Sweden has no binding defense commitments to other states but has strengthened its defense partnerships and national defense capability. This emphasis on

collective defense and cooperation serves as a basis for justifying the use of military force when needed, especially for self-defense and supporting allies within the framework of solidarity agreements.

5.5 Russia as a Perceived Threat

In the spring of 2022, the Swedish government and its security policy bodies assessed that the security situation in the region had significantly deteriorated. This assessment was based on Russia's military actions, particularly the invasion of Ukraine that began on February 24. Swedish authorities observed an increasing military presence and exercises near its borders, raising concerns about the potential risk of conflict spilling into the Baltic Sea region (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 7).

In the Swedish government's Statement of Foreign Policy from February 16, 2022, Russia's confrontational rhetoric and military activities were described as unacceptable, with the increased Russian military presence at Ukraine's border and demands for security guarantees being seen as a threat to the foundations of the European security order. Despite this assessment, Sweden maintained its policy of military non-alignment at that time (Swedish Government 2022: 1). Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson also emphasized in a special parliamentary debate on February 24, 2022 (Swedish Parliament 2022c: 39), that Sweden did not see any immediate military threat to the country, despite the deteriorating security situation. Thus, the longstanding policy of military non-alignment would remain unchanged (ibid.).

Sweden's position of not joining NATO at this time was based on an assessment that there was no direct and immediate threat that justified membership. Despite acknowledging that an armed attack on Sweden could not be ruled out, according to the proposition "Total defense 2021 - 2025" (Prop. 2022/21:30: 98), the prevailing view was that Russia's threat to Sweden was not direct.

In public statements and debates starting in May, Russia and its leader, Vladimir Putin, were again highlighted as the primary threat. The report "Deterioration of the security environment - implications for Sweden" (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022) and subsequent discussions in parliament (Swedish Parliament 2022c) reflected a shared perception of the

threat posed by Russia in the Euro-Atlantic area and emphasized the seriousness of Vladimir Putin and other Russian representatives referring to the threat of using nuclear weapons (Swedish Parliament 2022c; Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 11).

In the report “Deterioration of the security environment - implications for Sweden” (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 7), it is stated that “Sweden’s security policy aims to guarantee the country’s independence and autonomy, safeguard our sovereignty, Sweden’s interests, and our fundamental values, and maintain freedom of action against political, military, or other pressures.” This means actively working to defend the nation’s sovereignty - its right to make independent decisions about its internal and external affairs without external interference. It also involves maintaining the nation’s economic, political, and cultural interests on the global stage. This can include trade routes, diplomatic relations, and cultural exchange, all of which are crucial for the country’s welfare and international standing. Fundamental values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law are also a central pillar of Sweden's security policy. Preserving these values is essential for maintaining the functionality of Swedish society and the citizens’ trust in the state and its institutions (ibid.).

5.5.1 Summary

In the spring of 2022, Russia’s actions and political stance were considered the greatest threat to Sweden. This is evident from documents and statements by the Swedish government and its security policy bodies, which responded strongly to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24. The threat to Sweden was seen primarily as indirect, in the form of increasing uncertainty and potential consequences for the Baltic Sea region, rather than as a direct military attack. Sweden’s response was to maintain its policy of military non-alignment while emphasizing the country’s independence and sovereignty.

The key elements considered worth protecting were Sweden’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and fundamental values. This highlighted the importance of maintaining the nation’s freedom of action against political, military, or other pressures. Sweden aimed to ensure its independence and autonomy, as underlined in the report “Deterioration of the security environment - implications for Sweden” (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022). The Swedish government also reviewed its national defense and international cooperation to address the changed security policy conditions.

5.6 Uphold the Relationship with Finland and the U.S.

Out of all the empirical material, two things stand out: Russia is considered the main threat, and Sweden needs to continue its close cooperation with Finland. As mentioned earlier, in the 2022 Foreign Policy Declaration, Ann Linde emphasized that Sweden's two main defense policy priorities were to strengthen national capability and deepen international defense cooperation. She also said, "In this, the cooperation with Finland occupies a special position" (Swedish Government 2022: 1). This was stated in the context of Sweden not seeking NATO membership, as military non-alignment served Sweden well (ibid.).

In the report "Deterioration of the security environment - implications for Sweden" (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 25), the "defense cooperation with Finland" is once again highlighted as particularly important. Just like in the Foreign Policy Declaration (Swedish Government 2022: 1), this indicates a significant emphasis on the defense cooperation between Sweden and Finland. Both quotes show that the deteriorating security situation (to which Russia has contributed) has served as a catalyst for clarifying the importance of Finnish-Swedish defense cooperation. In the Swedish Armed Forces' orientation (2020-2025), cooperation with Finland is also described as having a special status in Swedish defense policy, a partnership that should be deepened. When the Swedish Armed Forces' orientation was decided, the cooperation between Sweden and Finland involved "planning and preparations to uphold the territorial integrity of each country" (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 2-3).

In addition to Finland, the U.K. and the U.S. are also mentioned as two important partners for Sweden (Swedish Government 2022: 5). Cooperation with the U.K. is described early on as important, not least in "security and defense policy, trade, as well as education and research" (ibid.). Cooperation with the U.S. is described in similar terms (ibid.). Another country mentioned as an important partner for Sweden is Canada, although this partnership is not detailed further (Swedish Parliament 2022a: 35). However, as noted earlier, the empirical material makes it clear that Finland was considered Sweden's most important partner country in the spring of 2022.

Public statements indicate that Finland leaned toward applying for NATO membership in the spring of 2022 as a measure to safeguard its security (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 16). While Sweden's security policy decisions are made independently, the leaders of both countries acknowledge that their security history and future welfare are closely linked. This underscores a pattern where Finland's and Sweden's considerations of NATO membership are not only individual choices but part of a broader regional security dynamic (Swedish Parliament 2022c: 2). An example of this is that the prime ministers of Finland and Sweden, Sanna Marin and Magdalena Andersson, held a joint press conference in Stockholm on April 13, 2022, to discuss potential NATO memberships. During this event, Marin indicated that Finland's decision on the matter could be expected in just "a couple of weeks" (YouTube 2022).

The policy documents and parliamentary protocols cited confirm that Finland's pursuit of membership is expected to improve national security, which would be further strengthened if Sweden also joined (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 35). This assessment is supported by the joint declaration that Finnish-Swedish NATO membership would be most advantageous for both countries' security and should ideally occur in coordination. The Swedish government's opinion, as evidenced by statements from Magdalena Andersson, is that Swedish NATO membership is of utmost importance for the country's security, especially given that other E.U. countries in the Baltic region are already members. The government also believes a swift application is necessary due to the acute security situation (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 2).

5.6.1 Summary

In the spring of 2022, Finland stood out as Sweden's foremost defense partner, a bond emphasized in both countries' security policy discourses. Finland showed a clear tendency to seek NATO membership to bolster its security, which became public during a press conference on April 13, predicting a decision soon. This development, combined with Sweden's desire for deeper defense cooperation, may help explain why Sweden also decided to follow suit and apply for NATO membership, aiming to consolidate regional security and strengthen Nordic solidarity.

6 Discussion

Historically, Sweden has long perceived the drawbacks of NATO membership to outweigh the benefits, but in May 2022, the government decided to apply for membership in the alliance (The Swedish Parliament 2023). The question is whether this decision can be understood through Sweden's strategic culture. To answer the thesis' research question, "How can Sweden's strategic culture help us understand the government's decision to join NATO in 2022?", this discussion will compare the different ideal types with the results from the empirical analysis.

Regarding the ideal type of **promoting international peace and security**, Sweden's foreign policy has historically been focused on this goal, playing an active global role, including participation in UN peacekeeping operations and activities coordinated by NATO. Despite these international collaborations, Sweden maintained a stance of military non-alignment, which became an integral part of the nation's identity and self-image as a moral guide on the international stage (Ruffa 2013: 344-346).

Sweden's avoidance of formal military alliances allowed the country to act as an independent and flexible actor, facilitating its ability to mediate and promote peace without the constraints and complications that often accompany binding military commitments. This strategic orientation has not only raised Sweden's international profile as a responsible and reliable partner but also strengthened its position as an advocate for global stability and peace (Ruffa 2013: 343; Dalsjö 2017: 10; Ångström 2015: 257).

In May 2022, however, Sweden took a historic step by applying for NATO membership, marking a significant shift in the country's strategic behavior. Sweden's longstanding values of neutrality and international peace remained constant, but changing security threats, especially in light of increasing regional instability, necessitated reconsidering its previous defense policy. In February 2022, Ann Linde expressed a new dual-focused defense policy in the government's Statement of Foreign Policy: continuing to deepen international defense cooperation while significantly strengthening national defense capabilities (Swedish Government 2022: 1). Although this may appear to be a shift in strategic culture, it could be

an adaptation in strategic behavior to address new external threats and ensure both national and regional security.

The fact that Sweden changed its strategic behavior by seeking NATO membership reflects a pragmatic response to the changing security environment rather than a fundamental shift in the deeply rooted values of non-alignment and international peace. This distinction between strategic culture and strategic behavior underscores the ability of states to dynamically adapt their external political actions in response to changing circumstances while maintaining their fundamental cultural values and identities.

Moving on to the next ideal type, **the importance of the EU and NATO**. Since the end of the Cold War, Sweden's relationships with both NATO and the EU have grown stronger (Ruffa 2013: 349–350). While the EU has become the primary platform for Sweden's international cooperation – a role that was reinforced when Sweden joined the EU in 1995 – NATO also plays a significant role in the country's foreign and security policy. Sweden has gradually approached NATO through participation in partnership programs and by contributing troops to NATO-led operations. This active participation demonstrates a practical and pragmatic security policy (Westberg 2021: 214; Ruffa 2013: 349-350; Doeser 2016: 288-289).

Although Sweden has long outwardly adhered to military non-alignment, the country's actual conduct – participating in NATO operations – demonstrates a flexible and strategic approach to international defense and security cooperation. Sweden has long prioritized collaboration with the EU but has not closed the door to deeper engagement with NATO (Ruffa 2013: 349-350; Doeser 2016: 288-289). This illustrates a balanced and versatile foreign policy that allows Sweden to adapt to shifting global security dynamics while maintaining its fundamental non-alignment. By balancing these relationships, Sweden has effectively navigated the complex international landscape, strengthening its security policy position in Europe and globally.

The importance of the EU and NATO was emphasized also in the spring of 2022. While the EU remains considered Sweden's primary political arena, it is stressed that the EU does not offer the same type of defense guarantee as NATO (Swedish Government 2022: 38).

Understanding the difference between EU and NATO defense guarantees is crucial for a clear picture of Sweden's security policy position. NATO's Article 5 provides a strong defense guarantee, meaning that an attack on one NATO member is seen as an attack on all members,

obligating them to act in defense of the attacked country. On the other hand, the EU has no equivalent defense guarantee. While the EU has a solidarity clause that encourages member states to assist each other in the event of an attack, it does not impose the same binding defense obligation. This makes it strategically necessary for Sweden to balance its engagement and collaboration with both the EU and NATO (ibid.). By maintaining strong ties to the EU, Sweden can continue to play an active role in the region's political and economic matters, while closer cooperation with NATO provides robust security guarantees. This dual strategy is central to ensuring Sweden's national security in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

Both before and after the turn of the year 2021/2022, Sweden maintained its EU membership and strong ties with NATO. However, there is a clear development from a more balanced and perhaps cautious approach to NATO before 2022 to a clearer and more necessary integration with NATO in the latter text, as a response to current security threats. This evolution in strategic behavior does not indicate a shift in strategic culture – which remains marked by a desire to balance national interests with international commitments and partnerships – but rather demonstrates a pragmatic adjustment of Sweden's strategy to meet new international security realities. Sweden's ability to adapt its strategic behavior without deviating from its core strategic culture can be interpreted as a deep understanding of its traditional values and the need to respond to changing external circumstances.

Regarding the next ideal type, **protecting Sweden and international peace**, Sweden's defense policy during the Cold War was characterized by a strong military buildup and a firm neutrality policy. The country developed one of Europe's most powerful defense forces and created a comprehensive total defense strategy, encompassing both military and civilian elements to handle potential threats (Kronvall & Petersson 2012: 20-21; Jonter 1999: 11-12). However, after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Sweden shifted its security strategy to adapt to a new international order. The focus moved from territorial defense to international cooperation and participation in international operations. This change led to a new emphasis on promoting international peace and security, with the abolition of conscription and participation in various UN- and NATO-led operations (Doeser 2016: 287; Kronvall & Petersson 2012: 87-88; Ångström 2015: 238-239).

After 2014, Sweden's defense underwent a significant reorientation, once again focused on strengthening national defense and increasing operational capability. This strategic shift

included rebuilding a wartime organization capable of countering armed attacks (Swedish Government 2020a: 98-100). After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the government felt that the development of the operational capabilities was not progressing quickly enough to meet the accelerating demands of the global security situation, leading to the decision to further accelerate the defense buildup (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 22; Swedish Ministry of Defense 2022a: 1-2). This reflects not a change in strategic culture but an adjustment in defense strategy to adapt to the new reality.

The dynamic between Sweden's strategic culture and behavior illustrates how deeply rooted cultural values can resurface and shape policy in response to external threats. Despite a period of international orientation, the fundamental cultural value of self-reliance and self-defense has once again become prominent. Sweden's response to international threats – rapidly strengthening military capacity and improving operational capability – is a practical expression of strategic behavior that is flexible and deeply rooted in national security interests. This link between Sweden's strategic culture and behavior can be seen as a state behavior that is both adaptive and proactive. By continuously evaluating and adjusting its security strategy, Sweden has maintained a robust defense posture that balances historical values with contemporary security requirements. This outcome suggests that Sweden's defense capacity was not sufficiently robust to counter an attack and protect Sweden and international peace, reflecting that the military was not adequately strong relative to the threat Sweden faced.

Regarding the ideal type of **humanitarianism**, Sweden's historical use of military force has traditionally focused on humanitarian missions and international self-defense, often through participation in UN-sanctioned peacekeeping operations. This inclination to intervene to protect civilian lives and prevent crimes against humanity reflects a deeply rooted strategic culture that values international law and humanitarian principles (Ruffa 2013: 350; Ångström & Honing 2012: 679).

As geopolitical dynamics have shifted, particularly after Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Sweden has had to reconsider and reinforce its security policy direction. This has resulted in a shift from a previous focus on international humanitarian missions to a strengthened emphasis on national self-defense (Prop. 2022/21:30: 98). This change likely reflects a new reality where the security of one's own state requires more attention due to increased threats.

However, the fundamental humanitarian drive has not disappeared; instead, the focus on what is worth protecting has shifted from international missions to include the nation itself.

To further connect Sweden's defense policy development with the concept of strategic culture, it is essential to understand how the nation's historical experiences and values shape responses to changing global threats like **Russia's threat to Sweden**. During the Cold War, Sweden's strategic culture was marked by a firm neutrality policy, which served as a defensive mechanism against the then-Soviet Union's military and geopolitical threats. This culture of neutrality and territorial defense was not only the result of external threats but also part of a broader cultural identity that valued sovereignty and independence. After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russia went through a period of political and economic instability, which initially reduced its capacity and willingness to exert military influence in the region. During this time, the direct military threat to Sweden also decreased, leading to a reduction in Swedish defense forces and an increased focus on international missions and non-military threats such as terrorism and cyberattacks (Westberg 2021: 223-224).

From the mid-2000s, and especially after 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the threat landscape changed again. Russia demonstrated an increased willingness and capability to use military force to achieve its geopolitical goals, once again posing a significant regional threat. This change was a wake-up call for Sweden and other Baltic Sea region countries, raising awareness of the need for stronger defense and security cooperation (Westberg 2021: 223-225; Britz & Westberg 2015: 424).

Traditionally, what Sweden considered worth protecting was its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and fundamental values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. As the new Russian threat became more apparent and global security shifted, Sweden determined that its traditional non-alignment policy no longer provided sufficient security. Therefore, Sweden's strategic culture can be seen as a flexible yet enduring framework that both shapes and is shaped by the nation's perception of and response to external threats. This dynamic highlights the importance of understanding strategic culture as a fundamental component of a nation's security policy and its ability to navigate a changing global context. This situation suggests that Sweden's government eventually could not withstand the long-standing threat from Russia and ultimately had to abandon its military non-alignment. The threat had reached

a point where it could not be allowed to grow stronger, compelling Sweden to seek greater security through NATO membership.

Lastly, considering the ideal type of **maintaining relations with Finland and the U.S.**, Sweden's decision to join NATO can largely be understood through the lens of its strategic culture, historically marked by deep cooperation with neighboring nations, particularly Finland. This cultural and historical connection has been especially prominent in security policy, where Sweden has long valued international cooperation and collective security, but without binding military obligations (Wither 2020: 73-74; Westberg 2023: 216).

Finland's explicit intention to apply for NATO membership in the spring of 2022 can be interpreted as a pivotal moment for Swedish security policy. Finland, which has long been Sweden's most important defense partner, likely played a key role in shaping Sweden's strategic decision to join NATO. When Finland expressed its intent to bolster its security through NATO membership, it became clear that if Sweden did not follow suit, it would be the only nation in the Nordic region outside the alliance (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 2, 35). This scenario was considered a significant security risk, which may have pressured Sweden to reconsider its position. The government's assessment was that Sweden's security would be best guaranteed by NATO membership, partly to maintain regional security balance and avoid isolating itself from the security arrangements in which its Nordic neighbors participated (Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022: 35). Sweden's strategy to join NATO alongside Finland was not only a response to external threats but also a manifestation of a strategic culture that values cooperation and collective defense within a broader regional framework unit.

7 Conclusion

Sweden's historical strategic culture, focused on military non-alignment and an active role in international peacekeeping, did not fundamentally shift because of a change in the country's strategic culture. Instead, the move to apply for NATO membership in 2022 was primarily a strategic reaction to a series of external pressures and shifts in the regional security landscape.

The trigger for this decision was Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which starkly highlighted the vulnerabilities in the regional security environment and demonstrated that Sweden's existing defense capabilities were potentially inadequate against new, emergent threats. This realization came at a time when Sweden had not yet sufficiently strengthened its military readiness to counter such aggression independently. Additionally, despite being a significant political entity, the European Union lacks the collective defense mechanisms akin to those of NATO, which became a critical factor in Sweden's reassessment of its security strategy. Interpretively, the EU's inability to offer concrete security assurances like NATO made the alliance an appealing alternative for enhanced protection.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that the decision was closely tied to Finland's contemporaneous move to seek NATO membership. Given the deep historical and strategic ties between Sweden and Finland, the prospect of Finland joining NATO and potentially leaving Sweden as the sole Nordic country outside the alliance posed significant risks and challenges. This scenario would not only increase Sweden's strategic isolation but could also alter the regional security balance, making cooperation more challenging.

Sweden's decision to apply for NATO membership can be seen as a pragmatic response to a "strategic shock" rather than a departure from its strategic culture. The move represents an adaptation to a new security reality where regional stability and security dynamics necessitate more robust collective defense arrangements. Thus, the decision underscores a continuation of Sweden's strategic culture, emphasizing pragmatism and adaptability in response to evolving international circumstances, aiming to ensure national and regional security in a markedly uncertain global context.

In conclusion, to broaden the results and connect them to the question of why Sweden chose to join NATO in 2022 but not after Russia's war in Georgia in 2008 or Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, when the situation was also critical, the balance between the threat and defense capability can be considered to have been different. The threat against Sweden may not have been perceived as severe as it was after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

7.1.1 Contribution, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This thesis complements existing research by emphasizing the importance of including factors like national identities, historical values, and political culture in the analysis of alliance decisions. Sweden's move toward NATO membership illustrates the dynamic between traditional realist explanatory models and the need to integrate perspectives from constructivist theories that focus on ideas, identity, and cultural factors. By understanding this interplay between internal and external drivers, research on small-state security strategies can develop into a more nuanced understanding of how these states navigate a complex international environment. This shift in research focus offers crucial insights into how small states like Sweden adapt their strategies not only as a response to external threats but also in light of their internal values and political culture.

When discussing the limitations of this thesis, it is worth noting that the research specifically focuses on Sweden and its strategic culture, meaning the conclusions are not very generalizable. Despite this limitation, the study design offers a valuable model that can be applied to other case studies. By adapting the methodological framework and theoretical perspectives used in this research, similar studies can be conducted in other national contexts, creating a level of generalizability.

As a foundation for future research, this thesis can be utilized to explore strategic cultures across different nations. Future studies can uncover patterns and essential factors that hold true beyond individual national contexts by applying and potentially modifying the research design to other countries. This approach would significantly enrich the knowledge base in international relations and security studies, providing a more detailed and varied understanding of how strategic culture influences alliance politics. Therefore, this work is a starting point that opens avenues for subsequent research, aiming to expand and deepen our

comprehension of the intricate ways strategic cultures shape international alliances and enhance our grasp of global security dynamics.

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