Joining NATO

A qualitative case study of Sweden’s autobiographical narrative

Author: Ragna Stertman
Supervisor: Anna Michalski

Master Thesis in Political Science, 30 ECTS
Department of Government
Uppsala University
Fall 2023

Word Count: 17888
Abstract

In May 2022 the Swedish government took the momentous decision to apply for membership in NATO, putting an end to what had constituted Sweden’s foreign and security policy identity for over half a century. In order to make sense of this historical shift and its entailing implications for Sweden’s identity in the international sphere, I turned to the literature on ontological security studies and autobiographical narratives. This literature indicated that states need to maintain a stable and continuous identity in order to remain ontologically secure. However, this kind of security can be maintained despite alterations that destabilize the state’s identity through modifications of the state’s autobiographical narrative. According to some scholarly work, policymakers can activate some parts of the narrative and deactivate others, in order to maintain continuity to the state’s autobiography and in continuation its identity. Thus, through a qualitative analysis of Sweden’s autobiographical narrative, this thesis makes use of and tests this underpinning logic. In line with previous research, the generated insights from the study suggests that Sweden’s autobiographical narrative manifests some continuity despite membership in NATO standing in stark contrast with the state’s identity.
Table of content

1. Introduction............................................................................................................... 5
   1.1. Introducing the case............................................................................................. 5
   1.2. Aim and research question................................................................................ 6
   1.3. Ontological and epistemological underpinning............................................. 8
2. Theoretical Framework............................................................................................. 9
   2.1. Sweden’s foreign policy identity......................................................................... 9
   2.2. Ontological Security Studies............................................................................ 15
   2.3. Autobiographical Narratives............................................................................ 17
   2.4. The Three-Layered Model.............................................................................. 18
3. Design and Methodology.......................................................................................... 20
   3.1. Design and case selection.................................................................................. 20
   3.2. Scope and delimitations.................................................................................... 21
   3.3. Material............................................................................................................. 22
   3.4. Method – Qualitative narrative analysis......................................................... 24
4. Analysis...................................................................................................................... 28
   4.1. The moral superpower....................................................................................... 28
   4.2. The mediator...................................................................................................... 37
   4.3. Discussion of findings....................................................................................... 44
5. Conclusion.................................................................................................................. 48
Bibliography................................................................................................................ 51
1. Introduction

1.1. Introducing the case

Sweden’s adoption of neutrality has often been highlighted as crucial for the country’s 200 years of peace and became the most defining aspect of Sweden’s identity in the international sphere during the Cold War (Westberg, 2021: 215). At the time, the identity as non-aligned influenced Sweden’s external relations considerably and eventually became associated with other characteristic elements of the country’s foreign policy, such as generous foreign aid, advocacy for nuclear disarmament and mediation. After the Cold War it was generally assumed that non-aligned states would abandon their neutrality doctrine as a result of its fading relevance - there was suddenly nothing to be neutral between (Agius, 2011: 377). However, Sweden remained militarily non-aligned and the neutrality doctrine continued to color the country’s identity even after the turn of the millennium (Agius, 2013: 182-183). Because of the doctrine being so deeply rooted in Sweden’s identity, it has even been argued that the country would most likely never abandon military non-alignment (Cottey, 2013: 465-466). Yet, in the light of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine the 24 of February 2022, the Swedish government made a reassessment of the security situation with the final conclusion to apply for membership in the military-alliance the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Prot. 21/22: 114). What had constituted the cornerstone of Sweden’s foreign and security policy for over half a century was coming to an end. On the day of the decision, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said that “Sweden is facing a major shift. We leave one era and enter another” (Prot. 21/22: 114, anf. 9, my translation). The subsequent Foreign Minister Tobias Billström went even further, stating that Sweden’s future membership in NATO would mean “a new foreign and security policy identity” (Regeringskansliet, 2023).

Moving beyond conventional theories on identity, recent scholarship within International Relations (IR) has provided new insights on how the identity of the state matters for its behavior. By drawing from literature on ontological security, this scholarship has demonstrated that states, just as other social actors, care about their identities and strive to maintain a stable and continuous ‘Self’ (Mitzen, 2006). If a state’s foreign policy suddenly does not reflect the identity of the same, the state experiences an unpleasant sense of
uncertainty, in the literature referred to as *ontological insecurity* (Kinvall & Mitzen, 2017: 4). Applying this theorization to Sweden’s longstanding and deep-rooted identity as militarily non-aligned, the application for membership in NATO can arguably be understood as a threat to Sweden’s ontological security. However, some studies indicate that ontological security can be maintained or restored despite changes that undermine or destabilize the state’s identity. More precisely, these studies suggest that policymakers adjust the state’s autobiographical narrative in order for the foreign policy change to resonate with the state’s identity (Subotic, 2016; Eberle & Handl, 2020). By discursively activating some parts of the narrative and deactivating others, states are able to bridge the past and the present and maintain a biographical continuity to their identities, despite disruptive policies. Can these theories help us make sense of Sweden’s identity in the face of the application for membership in NATO?

### 1.2. Aim and research question

This thesis is a qualitative case study looking at the development of Sweden’s identity from the mid-20th century, until the decision to apply for membership in NATO and most importantly the year following that decision. More specifically, it will examine if and how there is continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative despite NATO-membership standing in stark contrast to Sweden’s longstanding identity as militarily non-aligned.

**Research question:** *Is there continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative despite the application for membership in NATO and if so, how is that continuity discursively constructed?*

The aim of this study is twofold. Primarily it seeks to add to the existing literature on ontological security by examining theories on how states respond to threats to their ontological security. Previous research within the field provides this thesis with a theoretical expectation that there will be continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative despite NATO-membership undermining the state’s identity. The thesis will investigate whether this underpinning theory is strengthened by the case of Sweden. Moreover, how political leaders cope with the threat of ontological insecurity through the state’s autobiographical narrative is relatively understudied and scholars have urged for further testing of newly developed analytical frameworks. Jakub Eberle and Vladimir Handl (2020) have established a model
that conceptualizes a state’s autobiographical narrative as three layers encompassing the state’s *Self*, the state's relation to *significant Other/s* and the state’s *perspective of the international system*. The model is successfully applied to the case of Germany and its identity as a “civilian power”, but Eberle and Handl also underline the need to further test the model by applying it to cases of more dramatic shifts in foreign and security policy (Eberle & Handl, 2020: 56). Arguably, Sweden’s application for membership in NATO serves as a particularly well-suited case for such examination. Hence, by making use of the model the ambition is to investigate whether its organization and conceptualization of autobiographical narratives is fruitful to the analytic process of sense-making to the same.

The secondary aim of the thesis is to contribute with new insights about Sweden’s identity in the international sphere during a time when the country’s foreign and security policy is going through a considerable reorientation. Previous research indicates that Sweden’s foreign and security policy has been characterized by relative stability and continuity. Dramatic shifts have proven unusual, even when there has been a change of government with different ideological underpinnings (Brommesson & Ekengren, 2022: 218). In the light of this trend, the decision to apply for membership in NATO can be regarded as a historically dramatic alteration of Swedish foreign and security policy which in turn calls for closer examination of what this reorientation means for Sweden’s identity in the international sphere. Understanding a state’s identity is valuable due to its constitutive role in foreign policy, relying on the constructivist premise that *identity* is a precondition for *national interests* because “an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is” (Wendt, 1999: 231). In this vein, identity can arguably not *explain* foreign policy directly, but render certain policies desirable or undesirable, feasible or infeasible (Eberle & Handl, 2020: 46). Here, the autobiographical narrative plays a crucial role for a state’s identity as it is *through* this narrative that the state comes into being. In Felix Berenskouetter’s own words, recognizing and understanding the national biography “improves our understanding of the perceptions influencing foreign policy both in terms of specific decisions and general attitudes” (2014: 280). Accordingly, understanding the development of Sweden’s identity, via the state’s autobiographical narrative, is critical in order to make sense of Sweden’s foreign and security policy in the foreseeing future.
1.3. Ontological and epistemological underpinning

The ontological foundation of this thesis relies on constructivism, taking as point of departure that “reality” is socially constructed. While recognizing that the material state, as in physical territory, exists, it is through the meaning that we attach to the state that it comes into being (Wendt, 1999). Hence, states become states through language and discursive practices. Following this line of argument, the epistemological view is that understandings provided by this thesis do not exist independently from the interpretive process. Put differently, the answer to the research question does not reflect an objective “truth” that has been obtained from an objective standpoint (Marsh, Ercan, Furlong, 2018: 178). The answers are rather brought into existence through my interpretation of the material, based on the accumulated knowledge and theories of the field. In order to provide the reader with full insight into this process, I will henceforth explain some of the concepts used throughout the text and how they are understood in this thesis.

The concept of identity is understood as an intersubjective construct, thus dependent on both the state’s own understanding of its identity as well as external subjects’, i.e. other states’, understanding and recognition of the same (Eberle & Handl, 2022: 44). Since other states’ understanding and recognition of the actor is vital for its identity, the identity is not independent from the actor’s actions and behavior. Moreover, a state, just as any social subject, can have multiple identities depending on the context in question (Wendt, 1999: 230). Hence, while recognizing that Sweden might have several identities, this thesis is concerned with Sweden’s identity as a foreign policy actor.

The concept of autobiographical narrative is understood as an intra-subjective construct, merely dependent on the state’s own telling of the story and not other states’ understanding and recognition of the same. While being intersubjectively constructed among the subjects that constitute the state, i.e. subjects internal to the state, this is not the perspective considered in this particular thesis.
2. Theoretical Framework

The first section provides the background to Sweden’s neutrality policy during the second half of the 20th century and how it came to influence the state’s identity even after the turn of the millennium. The following sections then outline previous literature which this thesis builds upon and intends to contribute to. It provides a short overview of the relevant scholarship within Ontological Security Studies (OSS) and existing literature on autobiographical narratives, followed by the disposition of the three-layered model.

2.1. Sweden’s foreign policy identity

The purpose of this section is to illustrate the relative continuity in Sweden’s identity for most part of the post-war era. Based on previous literature on Swedish foreign policy, this section provides an overview of Sweden’s neutrality policy during the second half of the 20th century and how it came to influence the state’s identity in the international sphere. Moreover, it demonstrates how particularly two elements of Swedish foreign policy at the time, closely connected to the neutrality doctrine, became central for Sweden’s identity. One element regards Sweden’s foreign aid policy as well as its vocal critique of moral wrongdoings in the international sphere. The other regards Sweden’s role as a mediator and advocate for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation globally. These two elements will henceforth be referred to as the moral superpower and the mediator, two labels that are invented for the sake of distinction in the analysis conducted in a later chapter of this thesis.

Sweden’s adoption of neutrality has often been highlighted as crucial for the country’s 200 years of peace. However, the extent to which Sweden has adhered to this policy is debatable. Coincidences, favorable circumstances and calculating politics are often emphasized as more probable explanations for Sweden’s peaceful history (Brommesson & Ekengren, 2022: 35). The official formulation that summarized the neutrality policy was “non-alignment in peace in order to remain neutral in wartime” (Möller & Bjereld, 2015: 437). To be non-aligned referred to the policy choice not to be part of any military alliance, which was supposed to enable neutrality in the event of war. In other words, by not committing to any collective security pact, Sweden could not be drawn into armed conflict as a third party. For the doctrine to be credible, Sweden had to rely on a relatively strong national defense and refrain from political partnerships that could undermine the image of Sweden as impartial (ibid,
Brommessen & Ekengren, 2022: 42). Membership in the European Community (EC), predecessor to the European Union (EU), was dismissed based on this logic and even the United Nations (UN) was at first considered controversial from a neutral standpoint (Brommessen & Ekengren, 2022: 136; Westberg, 2023: 203-204). Yet, after becoming a member in 1946, the UN would turn out to be a fruitful arena for the maintenance of Sweden’s image as impartial. For example, when votes were held in the General Assembly, Sweden voted in accordance with what was believed to enhance the approach that the country was not siding with any of the two superpowers (Åström, 2003:160-161).

As an integrated part of the neutrality doctrine, Sweden developed an ‘active foreign policy’, constituted by support for the Third World1 in the UN, considerable amounts of foreign aid and criticism of moral wrongdoings by other states (Brommessen, Ekengren & Michalski, 2022: 6). The approach related to the neutrality doctrine as non-alignment was thought to increase the room for maneuver and enable support for, as well as critique of, states across the bipolar world order. At the same time, the ‘active foreign policy’ was also understood as an instrument to strengthen the credibility of the neutrality doctrine (Brommessen & Ekengren 2022: 47; Westberg: 2023: 211). By frequently criticizing the United States and the Soviet Union for violations of human rights and international law, Sweden managed to profile itself as relatively impartial and independent from the two superpowers. The most noted example of such critique was Prime Minister Olof Palme’s condemnation of the US war in Vietnam, which he called “an abnegation of human dignity” (Agius, 2013: 115). Noteworthy is that this critical approach was not reserved for the two superpowers but was also directed towards military dictatorships in Latin America, the apartheid system in South Africa and the Israeli occupation of Palestine (Möller & Bjereld, 2015: 437-438).

Along the same line, Sweden’s foreign aid became an expression for independent action towards other states and a balancing tool between the two superpowers (Brommessen & Ekengren, 2022: 171-172). Nevertheless, the explicitly declared motivation behind Sweden’s foreign aid referred to deep-rooted feelings of solidarity and responsibility towards other human beings in need and it was primarily with this altruistic and humanitarian motives that Swedish foreign aid became associated at the time (Brommessen & Ekengren, 2022: 185-189). This approach, in combination with the vocal criticism of other states’ moral wrongdoings, provided Sweden with a moralist-activist image, both abroad and at home. In

---

1 Henceforth referred to as the Global South.
the eighties, the Swedish undersecretary of state at the time Pierre Schori even described Sweden as “the moral superpower” (Dahl, 2006: 896). While far from everyone agreed with this label, it became an important part of the dominant narrative about Sweden’s role as a foreign policy actor during the Cold War (Dahl, 2006).

The profile as impartial also allowed for the role as mediator and bridge-builder in international conflicts and negotiations (Brommesson & Ekengren, 2022: 41). Prime Minister Olof Palme was also keen to stress the connection between Sweden’s non-alignment and voice for reconciliation in the world and claimed that the former had given Sweden “the responsibility for contributing actively to building bridges between East and West” (Agius 2013: 109-110). The representation of Sweden as a mediator and bridge-builder corresponded well with Sweden’s peaceful history and added to the overarching portrayal of Sweden as a contributor to global peace and stability. This characterization was further reinforced through the domestic debate over nuclear-weapons. When Sweden’s potential acquisition of such weapons was debated in the aftermath of the Second World War, the opposing side argued that an atomic bomb was incompatible with Sweden’s commitment to international peace. Another common argument, frequently put forward by Foreign Minister at the time, Östen Undén, was that acquisition of nuclear weapons would counteract international efforts for disarmament. This reasoning became dominant after the signing of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968 which marked a definitive end to Sweden’s nuclear program as well as to the debate over its continuous function (Jonter & Rosengren, 2014). From then on, to limit the proliferation and testing of nuclear weapons became an important issue for Sweden’s foreign policy (Westberg, 2023: 191).

**End of the Cold War but not of non-alignment**

Since the end of the Cold War, Sweden has gradually departed from its neutrality doctrine and other roles and identities have emerged alongside the one of the non-aligned state (Brommesson, 2015). The dramatic changes to the international order in the early nineties and the victory of the Swedish conservative party in 1991 - the first one in over 60 years - revealed more contestation over Sweden’s neutrality policy, between conservative and liberal parties on the one hand and the social democrats on the other (Möller & Bjereld, 2015: 438, Agius, 2013, chapter 6). The changing circumstances opened up for new partnerships and collaborations in the political and military sphere. In 1994 Sweden initiated cooperation with NATO through the program *Partnership for Peace* (Pfp) and in 1995 Sweden became a
member of the EU (Möller & Bjereld, 2015: 441). Step by step, Sweden’s broader foreign policy went through a general process of Europeanization, both in terms of subjective identification and institutional structures. This European identity was later complemented by a Nordic dimension, emerging primarily out of closer security and defense cooperation between the Nordic neighbors (Brommesson, 2018). By 2009, the neutrality policy was finally replaced by a solidarity policy as the Swedish Riksdag adopted the so-called “declaration of solidarity”, based on Article 42.7 of the Lisbon Treaty. According to this declaration Sweden would not remain passive should another EU Member State or Nordic country be struck by disaster or attack (Westberg, 2023: 15).

Despite this development, Sweden has remained militarily non-aligned and the legacy of the neutrality doctrine has arguably lingered. While the doctrine was understood as an instrument to Sweden’s security needs during the Cold War, maintaining a non-aligned and autonomous foreign and security policy had also been presented by Swedish governments as a virtue in itself and an important part of Sweden’s identity in the international sphere (Möller & Bjereld, 2015: 438). Thus, by the end of the Cold War, Swedish non-alignment had become deeply embedded in Sweden’s identity as a foreign policy actor - an image of the Self that was widely shared by the public (Agius, 2013: 182-184; Cottey, 2013). In Prime Minister Göran Persson’s own words at the time, neutrality still colored the “attitude and Sweden’s role in Europe and the world” (Agius, 2013: 173, my translation). Hence, even though the neutrality doctrine came under political dispute and negotiations for membership in the EU was initiated, a survey in 1994 showed that 70 percent of the Swedish population was still in favor of a military non-aligned security policy that enabled neutrality in wartime (Möller & Bjereld, 2015: 442).

The two elements closely connected to the neutrality policy during the Cold War, the moral superpower and the mediator, also lingered. Considering the former, there has been substantial continuity to the portrayal of Sweden as a state standing up for democracy, human rights and international law as well as standing in solidarity with the Global South, marginalized groups and people in need. By frequently expressing concern over the situation for human rights and democracy in other countries (Regeringskansliet, 2008-2021), Sweden conveys an image of itself as a role model and a watchdog on the matter. While Sweden has maintained the view of poverty reduction, democratization and respect for human rights as
important values in themselves, they have also been conveyed as instrumental to Swedish and global security (Regeringskansliet, 2010-2019).

In particular, Sweden has maintained the international reputation as one of the most generous donors of foreign aid, associated with the national target to spend 1 percent of GNI, established in 1968 (Brommesson & Ekengren, 2022: 190). The explicit purpose of the assistance, with a clear focus on solidarity and responsibility towards other human beings in need, has only changed marginally since it was first formulated in 1962 and Sweden has continuously been classified as one of the most “selfless” donors in international comparisons (Brommesson & Ekengren, 2022: 185-190). This is a standing that different governments, regardless of ideological underpinnings, have been keen to highlight and uphold even after the turn of the millennium (Brommesson, 2022: 215). That the most vulnerable and conflict-ridden states have continued to constitute the majority of the recipients of Swedish foreign aid (Brommesson, Ekengren, 2022: 190) is further indication of Sweden’s ambition to maintain this reputation. In addition, this is further reinforced by the frequent portrayal of Sweden as having a responsibility to help people in need. An illustrative example of this is Foreign Minister Carl Bildt’s (M) statement in the foreign policy declaration from 2012 that “We [Sweden] have a moral responsibility to support people who are vulnerable and living in poverty” (Regeringskansliet, 2012).

In the same vein, there is continuity to Sweden's portrayal of itself as a mediator and a state that contributes to peace, stability and nuclear disarmament globally. As noted above, these were roles that Sweden took upon itself during the Cold War and that were presented as natural responsibilities due to the state’s non-aligned position. While this kind of association, between Sweden’s history of non-alignment on the one hand and identity as a mediator and advocate for peace and nuclear disarmament on the other, has become less frequent and explicit after the Cold War, traces of this narrative have arguably lingered. One of the more straightforward examples is former Foreign Minister Laila Frivalds’ (S) argument in 2006 that Sweden held a certain “credibility” to act on issues such as mediation and disarmament due to the position as militarily non-aligned (Prot. 05/06: 73, anf. 1). Over the years, this viewpoint has echoed in the debate over NATO, where some have argued that membership in the military alliance would most likely alter Sweden’s credibility as an independent voice in the debate over nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation (SOU 2016: 57).
Since Sweden’s foreign policy became increasingly coordinated with or through the EU, the element has also shone through in Sweden’s engagement in the union. For example, Swedish representatives have repeatedly pushed for a more extensive security agenda within the union, including peacekeeping, mediation, and dialogue (Brommesson, et al 2022: 8; Agius, 2011: 380). Moreover, in 2010, Carl Bildt and Foreign Minister of Finland Alexander Stubb took the initiative to create the European Institute of Peace with the aim to engage in peacemaking and conflict resolution globally (Bergmann, 2018). In general, Sweden’s contributions to peace and stability in the world, both through bilateral efforts and as members in the EU, UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), constitutes a recurring theme in the foreign policy declarations (Regeringskansliet, 2006-2021). Similarly, the issue of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation has continuously been featured as an important priority for various governments, regardless of ideological underpinnings (ibid). The continuous participation in global initiatives and operations for peace and conflict prevention, especially under the UN flag, are other examples that could be understood as ways for Sweden to confirm and uphold this element (Westberg, 2023: 59, 60). Even in the last decade, Sweden has remained one of the most frequent and active members in UN missions for peace (Brommesson, Ekengren, 2022: 161).

From the above review, this thesis suggests that the two elements - the moral superpower and the mediator - have continued to characterize Sweden’s identity even after the Cold War. Noteworthy is that while I suggest these two elements to be the primary characteristics of Sweden’s identity, they are not to be understood as the only elements or the complete constitution of the same. Rather, they are suggested as the most distinguishing features among various. Another necessary remark is that I do not claim that Sweden is or has been, for example, a “moral superpower” but merely that Sweden has been portrayed by others and by itself as a moral superpower in accordance with the above review.

These two elements will be further developed and operationalized in section 3.5.
2.2. Ontological Security Studies

The field of Ontological Security Studies (OSS) has grown considerably within International Relations (IR) since the beginning of the 21 century. Its conceptual core can be traced to sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) who understood the concept “ontological security” as a psycho-social need for individuals to experience a stable sense of “Self”. It has also been described as a need to “experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency” (Mitzen, 2006: 342). Put more concisely, it refers to the feeling of having a reasonably consistent identity. According to the theory, stability and consistency is important because certainty about who we are makes us confident in our interactions with others and in turn provides us with the capacity to act and navigate in our external environment. In that way, ontological security matters for our agency. If the sense of a continuous identity is challenged and destabilized, the individual will experience uncertainty and in turn an unpleasant state of ontological insecurity (ibid).

Within IR, the extrapolation of the concept from the individual to the state level has taken various forms (Krickel-Choi, 2022: 5). Jennifer Mitzen (2006) justified the extrapolation through the idea of the state as a society of individuals that identify with and become attached to that very society. Since the defining part of a society is “its identity and distinctiveness vis-a-vis other societies” its survival relies on the maintenance of that identity and distinctiveness (Mitzen, 2006: 352). Thus, the state is thought to care about its identity in order for their individual members to experience ontological security as a collective (ibid). The concept of ontological security was first brought to IR as a complement, but also as a contrast, to states’ need for physical security. Scholars such as Mitzen (2006) and Brent J. Steele (2008) demonstrated the relevance of the concept by examining cases where a state had sustained a certain foreign policy even though it was detrimental to the physical security of the same state. The explanation for this seemingly contradictory behavior could be found by looking at the state’s need to maintain its ontological security even at the expense of its physical security. Both authors concluded that because states care about their identity and sense of a stable Self, the pursuit to maintain ontological security drives state behavior just as physical security does.
Within the IR literature, destabilization of the identity, as the source of ontological insecurity, can arise both internally and externally to the state (Zarakol, 2010: 6). Taking the point of departure that identities are intersubjectively constructed, and thus also dependent on interactions with other subjects (Eberle & Handl, 2020: 44; Berenskoetter & Giegrich 2010: 421), the identity can be challenged and undermined from outside. Internally, ontological insecurity can arise from the state’s own behavior if its actions do not correspond very well with the state’s identity and sense of Self (Steele, 2008, 3). This is where I locate the case of Sweden as the policy choice to apply for membership in NATO is inconsistent with the longstanding identity of military non-alignment. In the literature, this kind of inconsistency between the state’s identity on the one hand and its actions on the other makes the state uncertain about who it is which in turn undermines its agency and capacity to navigate in its surroundings (Steele, 2008). However, some studies indicate that the uncertainty can be alleviated and ontological security maintained or restored, despite actions standing in contrast to the state’s identity. The research most relevant for this thesis focuses on the state’s autobiographical narrative as the tool through which the state responds to such challenging inconsistency (Subotic, 2016; Eberle & Handl, 2020). As a discursive process, the state can adjust the narrative in order for the autobiographical narrative to manifest continuity.

The focus on the autobiographical narrative as the mechanism through which ontological security is maintained or restored is not shared by everyone in the field (Eberle & Handl, 2020: 47; Krickel-Choi, 2022: 5; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017: 6). While the divergence is mainly a matter of emphasis, some scholars give more priority to the process of interaction with significant Others, and especially the routinization of relationships (Mitzen, 2006; Zarakol, 2010), whereas others stress the intra-subjective process of narrative adjustment (Subotic, 2016; Eberle & Handl, 2020; Berenskoetter, 2014, Steele, 2008). While this thesis recognizes both inter- and intra-perspectives as important processes for ontological security seeking, it only intends to examine the internal process. Yet, it will make use of an analytic model developed by Eberle and Handl (2020) that does take into account also the intersubjective process with the intention to bridge these two perspectives. This will be further explained in the following two sections.
2.3. Autobiographical Narratives

Narratives are essentially stories through which we make sense of ourselves and the world that surrounds us. It is mostly through these stories that our identities and roles come into being (Robertson in Boréus & Bergström, 2017: 123). They function as mental frames that weave together information about the reality, provide it with meaning and make it more comprehensible. In turn, they also inform our interpretations of the world and guide our behavior and actions in it. Autobiographical narratives, in which the narrator herself is the protagonist of the story, have the potential to reveal the narrator’s self-conception and idea of her origin, purpose and destiny in life. However, narrative construction is not to be mistaken as merely a cognitive process that occurs within. It is also a social process that takes place among and within groups, communities and collectives (Patterson & Renwick Monroe, 1998; 315, 316). Such a social entity also needs a convincing story about what brings it together, where it came from and where it is heading. In that sense, the autobiographical narrative is crucial for the group’s sense of collective identity - an assumption that constructivists within IR have argued to be true also for states (Ringmar, 1996; Berkenskoetter, 2014; Steele, 2008).

While the material state does exist also in isolation from the linguistic world, it is through the meaning that we attach to it that it is given its identity (Wendt, 1999). In this meaning making process, the autobiographical narrative plays a crucial role. Meaning is constructed in an autobiographical narrative which binds together the past, the present and the future, as well as provides the state with a place in the world and justifies its actions, or absence of actions (Berkenskoetter, 2014; Steele, 2008). Due to the state’s need to maintain a stable and consistent identity, the autobiographical narrative is seldom radically altered. Instead, foreign policy changes and external events are interpreted in line with the already existing narrative and incorporated accordingly (Subotić, 2016: 614). However, gradual and partial modifications of the autobiographical narrative are possible in the face of circumstances that contradict the state’s identity. Actually, this is precisely what enables the state to maintain or restore ontological security when threatened by such changing circumstances (Eberle & Handl, 2020: 46-47). Jelena Subotić (2016), for example, illustrates how Serbian elites selectively emphasized parts of the autobiographical narrative while excluding others in order to maintain Serbia’s ontological security despite the decision to accept the authority of Kosovo’s government (without recognizing Kosovo as a sovereign state), a move that shook Serbia’s identity to the core. Hence, the ontologically burdensome move to let Kosovo go was
alleviated by interpreting the event in line with the autobiographical narrative of Serbia, accompanied by small adjustments of the same. Similarly, Selden and Strome (2017) demonstrate how a gradual transformation of India’s national narrative, primarily by the media in the country, made closer bilateral relationship to the United States ontologically possible. They conclude that, while challenging India’s national identity, changes to the India-US relationship was necessary for the former’s physical security and therefore, the identity had to transform narratively for the state to remain ontologically secure.

While a state’s autobiographical narrative is intersubjectively constructed among the actors internal to the state, not every actor, group or individual enjoys the same influence over the storytelling. According to Subotić (2016: 615-616) it is primarily the “narrative entrepreneurs”, i.e., the political leaders, elite intellectuals, popular culture and the media that possess most power and influence over the state’s autobiographical narrative. For Subotić, these narrative entrepreneurs make use of the narrative strategically in order to enable their political purpose. As observed in the case study of Serbia, political leaders can activate some aspects of the narrative while downplaying others for a certain policy or event to make more sense from an ontological security perspective. Eberle and Handl (2020) provide a similar understanding of the state’s autobiographical narrative, suggesting that it constitutes a tool for political agents to cope with a changing environment. Nevertheless, this is not to say that political leaders can construct and reconstruct the narrative freely as they please. They are restricted, both by the narrative-structures through which they themselves exist and by the state’s already existing narrative framework which limits what can be said and understood in a meaningful way (Eberle & Handl, 2020: 44-46).

2.4. The Three-Layered Model

Recalling the divergence between scholars emphasizing intra- and intersubjective perspectives of how ontological security is maintained or restored, this section will outline and explain the three-layered model developed by Eberle and Handl (2020) which seeks to bridge these two approaches. While the core of the model is the intra-subjective construction of the state’s autobiographical narrative, it also takes into account that the state’s Self is not existing in isolation from the international society it is part of. Since the state is intertwined with the broader international context it comes into being also through references to other actors and to the international system (Eberle & Handl, 2020: 44). Thus, the autobiographical
narrative does contain representations of the Self but also representations of its relationship with other states and representations of the broader international order. Through, for example, identification with significant Others, portrayals of enemies and depictions of shared visions and ideas, the autobiographical narrative reveals components of the state’s identity that are not evident from the mere description of the Self (Eberly & Handl, 2020: 44, 45). This can all be captured by the three-layered model in which the autobiographical narrative is constituted by representations of: 1) the state’s Self, 2) the state’s relationship with significant Others, and 3) the state’s perspective of the international order in which the state operates (ibid). While these three layers are interconnected and thus require a certain level of coherence to make sense, Eberle and Handl demonstrate how states can adjust their autobiographical narrative by maintaining consistency in some layers and modifying the representations in others. They do so by scrutinizing the case of Germany’s autobiographical narrative as a “civilian power” and how it was adjusted in the face of Russia’s military invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 (2020).

In addition to the generated insights regarding German foreign policy, Eberle and Handl demonstrate the utility of their three-layered model for examination of how states make possible foreign policy change through modifications of their autobiographical narrative. One of the model’s great advantages is the separation of the narrative construction in three parts, as it escapes the simplified binary between continuity and change as analytic categories (Eberly, Handl, 2020: 47). However, they also assert that more research is needed in order to understand its applicability and therefore encourage further testing of the model, especially by applying it to cases with “a dramatic policy change, such as radical shift of alliances or a major break in international order” (Eberle & Handl, 2020: 56). Since Sweden’s application for membership in NATO corresponds particularly well with this description, this thesis intends to examine and make use of the model in the analysis of Sweden’s autobiographical narrative.
3. Design and Methodology

The following sections provide an overview of the approach and structure adopted in order to answer the research question. It starts off by explaining and motivating the selection of design, case, scope and limitations. This is followed by a description and discussion of the chosen material and methodology. The last section outlines the analytical framework before delving into the analysis in the next chapter.

3.1. Design and case selection

This thesis is a qualitative case study of the development of Sweden’s autobiographical narrative and in turn its identity in connection to the application for membership in NATO. My argument is that Sweden constitutes a case of a state whose ontological security is threatened due to a change of foreign policy that challenges the state’s identity. In accordance with previous research that this thesis relies upon there is a theoretical expectation that, despite the application for membership in NATO, Sweden’s autobiographical narrative will manifest continuity in order for the new foreign policy orientation to make sense from an ontological security perspective. The theory suggests that the state will emphasize some parts of the narrative and downplay others in order to bridge the past and the present and construct a biographical continuity to Sweden’s identity despite the inconsistency generated by the abandonment of military non-alignment.

Nevertheless, the case in question could arguably be considered a “hard case” or a “least likely case”, meaning that the conditions for the theory to be confirmed are rather unfavorable (Bennett & Elman, 2007: 173). The argument is that the application for membership in NATO constitutes such a sudden and radical disruption to Sweden’s identity. In comparison to the cases on which the theory has been developed, the foreign policy change threatening Sweden’s ontological security is not limited to merely one bilateral relation. On the contrary, membership in NATO constitutes a complete reversal of Sweden’s foreign and security policy as a whole. At least, that is how Foreign Minister Tobias Billström has described a future membership in the defense alliance. According to him, this will entail a new foreign and security identity for Sweden (Regeringskansliet, 2023). Presumably, these conditions make discursive adjustments for biographical continuity more complicated and less likely. The underpinning logic behind the examination of a theory on a least likely case is
that, if the theory is confirmed by the case, the theory will more likely be confirmed by other, similar cases as well. Put differently, if the theory is confirmed by a “hard case”, confidence in the theory increases (Bennett & Elman, 2007: 173). Hence, if Sweden’s autobiographical narrative manifests continuity despite the low likelihood, confidence in the theory and analytic model is increased.

Possibly, some would argue that results from one individual case study are rarely generalizable to the larger population, being a hard case or not. However, generalization is not the aim of the thesis. Rather, the ambition is to strengthen or weaken - to say something about - the confidence in the theory and the analytical framework explained in chapter 2. That said, it could also be argued that the case of Sweden, together with other similar case studies, adds to the existing literature on ontological security in a cumulative sense and that they, taken together, make generalizations possible.

Considering the overarching aim of the thesis, as well as its ontological and epistemological underpinnings, an interpretivist design is the most suitable approach for this case study. The thesis’s emphasis on the role of language as a constitutive and constructive force of social reality renders any design that simplifies language less feasible. Moreover, to explore and understand if and how there is continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative requires a design and methodology that enables uncovering and analyzing context-specific narration.

3.2. Scope and delimitations

The analysis of Sweden’s autobiographical narrative will focus on narration by governmental representatives and policymakers from governmental parties exclusively. This choice is based on two assumptions explained in section 2.3. First of all, I assume that governmental representatives and policymakers from governmental parties, in the capacity of narrative entrepreneurs, hold the greatest level of power and influence over the construction and adjustment of a state’s autobiographical narrative. Since the aim of the thesis is to understand if and how there is continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative it is arguably fruitful to examine the narration generated by the actors with the greatest impact on the construction of the story. In Eberle and Handl’s own words, “While anyone can tell a story, some actors are more likely to be listened to” (2020: 46). The second assumption is based on Subotic’s (2016) as well as Eberle and Handl’s (2020) argument that policymakers make use of the
autobiographical narrative strategically in order to enable their political purpose. Accordingly, this thesis supposes that government representatives and policymakers from the parties representing the Swedish government have the greatest incentives to adjust Sweden’s autobiographical narrative in order for the membership application to fit in and make sense to the overarching story about Sweden. Put differently, since the governmental representatives and the governmental parties are ultimately responsible for the application for, and future implementation of, membership in NATO, they have the greatest incentives to make sure that continuity to the autobiographical narrative is maintained despite NATO-membership.

The study will include both of the two governments that have so far been involved in the application for membership in NATO: the one-party government consisting of the Social Democratic Party (S) and the subsequent conservative government consisting of the Moderate Party (M), the Christian Democrats (KD) and the Liberals (L). The Sweden Democrats (SD) will also be included as they constitute the basis for the government and hence holds particular influence over the government’s policies. Considering the major role that the Social Democratic Party played in the construction of Sweden’s identity during the second half of the 20th century, continuity is expected to be more pronounced by representatives from that particular party. However, assuming that ontological security matters for everyone that identifies with a state and that policymakers do not act in a vacuum but has to take the state’s identity into account, continuity is expected to be manifested by representatives of the conservative government and policymakers from the corresponding parties as well.

3.3. Material

The material, in which the narrative will be analyzed, is constituted by two foreign policy declarations and transcripts from eight parliamentary debates on Sweden’s future membership in NATO, Sweden’s foreign policy, international cooperation and foreign aid. The annual foreign policy declaration is the official announcement of the government’s foreign policy orientation and is therefore highly relevant to include in the analysis. Transcripts from parliamentary debates have arguably some advantages compared to, for example, interviews or statements by policymakers in news media. First of all, parliamentary debates provide a more detailed coverage of any policy area in comparison to, for example articles, news reports or interviews which usually only encompass a specific policy issue. Secondly, what
policymakers say is to some extent always selectively filtered by journalists or editors and thus, the message will most probably not be conveyed in its entirety in the article or interview. Since the intention is to analyze what policymakers say and how they describe Sweden’s foreign policy rather than how media presents what policymakers say, parliamentary debates are preferable.

The debates have been selected based on their relevance for Sweden's foreign policy. Annual parliamentary debates are held regarding each of the budget domains proposed by the government. It can be contended that the budget areas with greatest importance for the country’s foreign policy are area 7 on foreign aid (Utgiftsområde 7 - Internationellt Bistånd) and area 5 on international cooperation (Utgiftsområde 5 - Internationell Samverkan). These are particularly important occasions for policymakers to discuss the orientation of the government’s policies in the corresponding areas. Policymakers of the governing parties have the opportunity to respond to questions posed by the opposition as well as motivate and justify the government’s policies. The same argument is made regarding the debates on foreign policy. This debate is also held once a year, in connection to the presentation of the government’s foreign policy declaration. Arguably this annual debate constitutes the most important occasion for the parliamentarians to discuss foreign policy.

At the time of writing this thesis, two foreign policy declarations have been issued since the decision to apply for membership in NATO. One was issued by the social democratic government the 10th of June 2022 (Regeringskansliet, 2022), and one was issued by the conservative government the 15th of February 2023 (Regeringskansliet, 2023). Accordingly, two foreign policy debates have been held (Prot. 21/22: 128; Prot. 22/23: 63), as well as two debates on foreign aid (Prot. 22/23:43; Prot. 23/24: 50) and international cooperation (Prot. 22/23: 38; Prot. 23/24: 43) respectively. Lastly, two debates concerning membership in NATO have been held. The first one occurred May 16, 2022, in connection with the government’s decision to apply for membership (Prot. 21/22: 114). The second one occurred March 22, 2023, in connection to the parliamentary vote on membership (Prot. 22/23: 79).

While the debates include speeches, statements and remarks by members of parliament from all parties, it is exclusively what the governmental representatives and policymakers from governmental parties say or respond that will be subject to analysis. This delimitation is based on the discussion in the previous section regarding governmental representatives and policymakers from governing parties having the greatest incentives to make sure that
continuity to the autobiographical narrative is maintained despite governmental policies contradicting the state’s identity. Ideally, the analysis would include more parliamentary debates, including interpellations, considering the various policy areas in which aspects of Sweden’s foreign policy could potentially be brought up. Nonetheless, due to time constraints and in order to safeguard the quality of the analysis the scope of the material has been limited to the debates outlined above. My argument is that, given the importance of these debates for Sweden’s foreign policy, I expect the most prominent and emphasized portrayals of Sweden’s foreign policy to be covered.

3.4. Method – Qualitative narrative analysis

In order to examine if and how there is continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative, a qualitative narrative analysis is applied to the material. In accordance with the theoretical assumptions about a state’s autobiographical narrative (See section 2.3.), a narrative analysis seeks to make sense of and understand a state’s identity through the narrative in which it is located. In Steele’s own words, the autobiographical narrative “is the locus from which we as scholars can begin to grasp how self-identity constrains and enables states to pursue certain actions over others” (2008: 10). The actual recognition of a narrative in empirical text depends on the nature of the material. Narratives are not always as straightforward as a classic tale but are sometimes detectable as disparate information that, when brought together, make up a coherent story about the phenomenon in question (Robertson in Boréus & Bergström, 2017: 130). For this thesis, the narrative analysis is constituted by a process of systematic reading of the material in order to identify information corresponding to and contrary to the moral superpower-element and the mediator-element (see sections 2.1. and 3.5.).

In accordance with the thesis’s epistemological assumptions, the narrative analysis is not understood as a method through which I can objectively obtain the “the truth” about Sweden’s autobiographical narrative. It is rather an approach that guides my interpretation of what the governmental representatives and policymakers say and thus facilitates the meaning-making process of the same. In other words, the meaning of narration is not given by the words and phrases themselves but will come into being through my interpretation of the same. Here, it is important to point out that no interpreter approaches a text as a clean slate - interpretation is inevitably socially and historically conditioned (Boréus & Bergström,
2017: 12-19). Since I am myself a citizen of Sweden and thus an individual that is attached to and identifies with Swedish society, I am very much part of the social context I am studying. However, this is not necessarily a disadvantage for the scientific ambitions of the thesis – quit the opposite. By continuously recognizing and critically reflecting upon my own relation to the case under study, my connection to Sweden should arguably be understood as valuable to the analysis in terms of the contextual knowledge it adds (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012: chapter 6). Moreover, for the sake of reliability I will be transparent throughout the analytical process and present the most critical quotes and paragraphs on which my analysis relies. In this way, the reader is provided with full insight into the interpretive inferences made which in turn strengthens the quality and reliability of the thesis (Boréus & Bergström, 2017: 140) The methodological process is structured by an analytic framework which will be outlined in the next section.

3.5. Analytic Framework – The Three-Layered Model

In order to identify and analyze if and how there is continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative despite the application for membership in NATO, an analytic framework that guides the analysis is useful. In accordance with the theoretical framework, this thesis will make use of Eberle and Handl’s three-layered model (2020) as the point of departure for the analysis. While the case of Sweden differs in some respects from the case of Germany to which Eberle and Handl first apply their model, the authors point out that they consider the model to be general enough to be useful to “different states in different contexts” (2020: 46). Thus, through systematic reading of the selected material I will search for representations of 1) Sweden’s Self, 2) Sweden’s relationship with significant Others and 3) Sweden’s perspective of the international order. These representations will then be compared to the two elements the moral superpower and the mediator in order to identify and analyze if and how there are continuities or discontinuities between the governmental representatives and the policymakers’ narration and the elements. Considering the theoretical assumptions I bring to the analytical process, it is crucial to continuously also look for and discuss discontinuities in the narration that contrast or contradict the various aspects of the two elements (Boréus & Bergström, 2017: 141, 142). The two elements explained in section 2.1. are operationalized below:
The moral superpower:

- **Internal level/The Self** - Sweden is portrayed as a state with moral and humanitarian capital that stands up for democracy, human rights and international law. The construction of Sweden as an altruistic state is manifested through, for example, the portrayal of generous and selfless foreign aid. The element is displayed through expressions of solidarity with states in the Global South and people living in poverty and vulnerability. Sweden is portrayed as having a moral responsibility to assist people in need.

- **Intersubjective level/Significant Others** - The Global South and people living in poverty and vulnerability constitute significant Others for Sweden. Sweden’s relation to these significant Others is expressed both directly and through international organizations, such as the EU and the UN. Against that background, international organizations also represent significant Others. The element is manifested through identifications of Sweden with other states and actors through shared values such as democracy, human rights and international law. It is also expressed through critique towards states violating democracy, human rights or international law.

- **Systemic level/Perspective of the international order** - The element is displayed through envisions of a democratic world where all people are free and equal and where human rights and international law are respected. It is also manifested through the understanding of poverty reduction, democratization and respect for human rights as instrumental to a more secure and peaceful world, Sweden’s security included.

The mediator

- **Internal level/The Self** - The element is manifested through portrayals of Sweden as a benevolent state with a long tradition of contributing to global peace and stability, often through dialogue and diplomacy and in the role as mediator or bridge-builder. Moreover, it is illustrated through the portrayal of Sweden as a state that engages in international initiatives for peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Non-proliferation and nuclear disarmament is displayed as a key issue in Swedish foreign policy.

- **Intersubjective level/Significant Others** - Sweden is identified with international organizations and other actors through shared ambitions in peace-related issues. The element portrays international organizations as crucial in order for Sweden to promote
and act for peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict prevention and conflict resolution as well as nuclear disarmament and non proliferation.

- **Systemic level/Perspective of the international order** - The element portrays Sweden’s vision of the world order as one based on international law and where conflict is solved through diplomacy, dialogue, cooperation and established international institutions. The international system is understood as safer with less nuclear weapons and the ultimate goal is a world free of the same.
4. Analysis

This chapter covers the analysis of the material in order to identify continuities and discontinuities with the two elements suggested and operationalized in this thesis: the moral superpower and the mediator. Findings and insights from the analysis will then be discussed in the last section.

4.1. The moral superpower

*Internal level / The Self*

Bearing in mind the element’s emphasis on Sweden as a state that stands up for and promotes democracy, human rights and international law, there is arguably considerable consistency in the material analyzed. Starting off with the social democratic government, these values are recurring in the foreign policy declaration. For example, Foreign Minister Ann Linde asserts the following:

> “Sweden will not lose its global voice if it joins NATO. We have a long history of standing up for international law, solidarity, disarmament, democracy and gender equality. This will be our future too.”
> (Regeringskansliet, 2022)

The reference to Sweden’s “long history” of standing up for named values and the affirmation that Sweden will continue to do so is arguably a clear example of linking the past and the present and thus speaks to the continuity of the element. However, while reassuring that Sweden will not abandon its “global voice” as a result of NATO membership, the reassurance itself suggests that abandoning this “voice” is something that could be anticipated when entering NATO, revealing an implicit contradiction between the alliance and Sweden’s identity in the international sphere. Conversely, once the conservative government is in power some policymakers from the corresponding parties portray Sweden’s future membership as something that will reinforce Sweden’s reputation and stance in relation to values such as democracy and human rights:

> “Membership in NATO will not only contribute to Swedish security, but it also holds significant importance for Sweden's reputation in the world. Simply put, we take a clearer stance on what our Swedish values should
represent. Democracy, rule of law, and human rights are all principles that NATO represents” (Prot 22/23: 79, anf. 43, Magnus Berntsson, KD, my translation).

Following this logic, Sweden would to a greater extent be associated with democracy and human rights when incorporated into NATO. This portrayal of Sweden’s future membership as a reinforcement of the country’s democratic status on the international stage is an adjustment of Sweden’s autobiographical narrative but likewise constructs continuity to the same as it connects aspects of the moral superpower-element to NATO.

Other policymakers are to an even greater extent merging together the past, the present and the future. In the quote below, Margareta Cederfelt (M) presents Sweden’s “voice” in international organizations as a coherent trajectory and international law, human rights and democracy as priorities:

“Sweden has been, is, and will continue to be a voice to be reckoned with in the international organizations of which Sweden is a member. In international efforts, the focus will be on international law, human rights, and democracy - in short, a rule-based order” (Prot. 22/23: 38, anf. 71, my translation)

Recalling that the moral superpower-element is also manifested through the portrayal of Sweden as a generous donor of development and humanitarian aid, it could be argued that there is substantial continuity in the material. The issue of foreign aid is a recurring theme in almost all of the debates analyzed and despite reductions in the budget for foreign aid, voices from all governmental parties portray Sweden as a generous state that looks out for people in need. On some occasions in the debates, policymakers and representatives deny the reductions altogether. Others recognize the decrease, yet underline that, even in spite of the cuts Sweden remains one of the largest donor’s globally. Seemingly, no one is willing to admit to lower ambitions or to deviate from the portrayal of Sweden as a generous donor. Ann Linde (S), in her capacity as Foreign Minister, maintains that Sweden is still “one of the primary donors in the world” when she is questioned on the social democratic governmen’s deductions in the aid budget in favor of reception of refugees (Prot 2021/22: 128, anf. 28, my translation). Furthermore, in the foreign policy declaration from June 2022, she describes this
deduction as a temporary measure and that the long-term goal is to go back to the traditional
target to allocate 1 percent of GNI to foreign aid:

“Sweden’s development assistance policy is world-leading in terms of both
scale and quality. Setting aside funds for people in need of protection in
Sweden due to war on our continent does not change this. Sweden's
development assistance will continue to be equivalent to one per cent of our
gross national income.” (Regeringskansliet, 2022)

In the above quote, it could be noted that the importance of the reallocation is downplayed,
treated as a parenthesis in Sweden’s trajectory as a donor, while emphasis is put on Sweden’s
role as “world-leading” on the matter. Arguably, this portrayal corresponds particularly well
with the moral superpower-element and thus maintains continuity to the autobiography. The
denial of lower ambitions in the realm of foreign aid is persistent even following the
assumption of power by the conservative government. The following quotes by two
policymakers from the governing parties are an illustration of this stance:

“It is often argued in the debate that Sweden is cutting down on foreign aid.
This is an incorrect assertion.” (Prot. 23/24: 50, anf. 35, Magdalena
Thuresson, M, my translation)

“But regardless of how you count, we are still one of the world's absolute
largest aid donors.” (Prot. 22/23: 43, anf. 1, Alexander Christiansson, SD,
my translation).

On the other hand, Foreign Minister Tobias Billström (M) expresses no ambition to revert to
the target of 1 percent of GNI, nor to uphold the role as a leader on development assistance.
The mere absence of those labels could be interpreted as a deviation from what the element
suggests but Billström also announces a “recalibration” of Sweden’s aid policy as a whole
(Regeringskansliet, 2023). Without concretizing exactly what this recalibration entails, the
term itself signals a transformation from what development assistance has been and thus,
indicating change rather than continuity of the element. While the same rhetoric is echoed by
other representatives in the debates, it is primarily the ways of doing foreign aid that is
subject to debate, rather than if Sweden should assist people in poverty and under oppression
or if Sweden should be a large donor. The quotes below illustrate particularly well how the
portrayal of Sweden as a generous and solidarity donor-state is communicated by policymakers from parties to the conservative government:

“For many years, Sweden has been a humanitarian superpower and a role model for countries around the world through our generous aid, aimed at combating poverty and strengthening the struggle for democracy and human rights. This is something we should be proud of and continue to develop”. (Prot. 22/23: 43, anf. 53, Gudrun Brunegård, KD, my translation)

“The Swedish foreign policy is also about solidarity. We have a tradition of being a country that aids the vulnerable. We still are, and we will continue to be.” (Prot. 22/23: 63, anf. 63, Martin Melin, L, my translation)

**Intersubjective level / Significant Others**

Considering the intersubjective level, representations of Sweden’s significant Others that resonate with the moral superpower-element are prevalent in the material. Recalling that people living in poverty and vulnerability constitute significant Others for Sweden, it is evident from several of the examples presented on the internal level that these groups continue to be central in the governmental parties’ speeches and remarks. In addition, it is crucial to bear in mind that international organizations also constitute significant Others as Sweden’s endeavors to aid people in need are to a large extent channeled through these actors. Here too, there is substantial agreement between the element and the representatives’ and policymakers’ narration. The quote below, from the social democratic government’s foreign policy declaration, illustrates both the sustained emphasis on people living in vulnerability (“most vulnerable”) and the central role that international organizations (“World Food Programme and the International Fund for Agricultural Development”) are given in Sweden’s efforts to aid those vulnerable groups:

“Russia’s aggression also cast the world into a deep food crisis that is hitting those who were already most vulnerable the hardest. Sweden is part of the global response to alleviate its effects. We are a large donor to the World Food Programme and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, which together save lives and improve livelihoods.” (Regeringskansliet, 2022)
This rhetoric is further sustained by policymakers from the conservative parties during their term in power. Magdalena Thuresson (M) even describes it as Sweden’s “humanitarian responsibility” to assist “the most vulnerable people in the many humanitarian crises around the world” (Prot. 22/23:43, anf. 35, my translation). When questioned by the opposition the subsequent year, whether the adopted reform agenda will reallocate aid from countries with least resources to middle-income countries, Magdalena Thuresson reaffirms that Sweden will “stand up for the most vulnerable people” (Prot. 23/24:50, anf. 39, my translation).

Despite these continuities, a small yet significant shift in the depiction of the beneficiaries of Sweden’s foreign aid can be noted during the conservative government. From having been depicted as a resource to exclusively help people in need it is by some policymakers and representatives described as a tool to serve “Swedish interests”. The word itself - “Swedish interests”- is arguably signaling a reorientation from aid based on altruism and solidarity to aid based on what benefits Sweden, which could be interpreted as a departure from the moral superpower-element. Seemingly, this is also what Foreign Minister Tobias Billström indicates in the foreign policy declaration from 2023, stating that the government is “setting a new course for its overall foreign, security and defense policy” and that they will pursue a foreign policy “with Swedish interests and democratic values at its core” (Regeringskansliet, 2023). Magdalena Thuresson (M) follows suit but specifies Swedish interests as human rights and democracy - which align with the moral superpower-element - but also as “controlling migration to Europe” (Prot. 22/23:43, anf. 35) which hardly aligns with the same. Arguably, this description is a deviation from the element’s portrayal of aid as a means to support or assist people, shifting the focus towards “control” rather than “help”.

Recalling the element’s portrayal of Sweden as a state that brings attention to violations of human rights, democracy and international law the discussions regarding Sweden’s relation to Türkiye is noteworthy. Both Ann Linde (S) and Tobias Billström (M), in their respective positions as foreign ministers, are pressed by the opposition (The Left Party and the Green Party) regarding Sweden’s possibilities to speak up against human rights violations and a shrinking democratic space in Türkiye while also being part of the same security alliance. The opposition also argues that the government is making concessions to president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and that it undermines the rights of the Kurdish minority. Both Linde and Billström circumvent these questions or give vague and ambiguous answers (Prot.
2021/2022: 128, anf. 16, 18; Prot. 22/23: 63, anf. 7) conveying an image of Sweden as unable to take a stance against another state for violations of democracy and human rights.

While these mixed and hesitant messages are given regarding Türkiye, critique towards other states is, during both governments, more straightforward. Actually, most utterances of this criticism regards violations of human rights, democracy and international law which clearly resonate with the moral superpower-element. However, an overwhelming proportion of this criticism is directed towards Russia which in turn overshadows condemnations of violations committed by other countries. This particular preoccupation with Russia and lack of concern for other regions portrays Sweden as a state less engaged in human rights, democracy and international law on a global scale. This is even noted by some of the legislatures themselves:

“\text{I think it's time that we also remember all the other conflict areas that exist. I also mention Tibet, Mr. Speaker. It's another country facing aggression from a major nation – China. It's important to also remember that there are other areas we must consider when discussing foreign policy.}” (Prot. 22/23: 63, anf. 145, Margareta Cederfelt, M, my translation)

Furthermore, some voices call for an even stronger stance against violations of democracy, human rights and international law by other states. The quote below by Yusuf Aydin (KD) is an illustrative example of this:

“\text{It is on the international stage that Sweden can make a difference in significant issues such as promoting human rights, democracy, and freedom, and combating poverty and hunger. By standing up for a rules-based world order, we can contribute to creating security and prosperity. To achieve this, we need to take a clearer stance against authoritarian and oppressive states. Sweden must be a driving force for change within the UN, ensuring that states cannot evade their responsibility regarding human rights. The UN needs to become more proactive and act more decisively to defend these values worldwide.}” (Prot. 23/24: 43, anf. 34, my translation)

The quote by Aydin is also an example of consistency with the element’s portrayal of international organizations as Sweden’s significant Others in the sense that they enable Sweden to act for democracy and human rights. By referring to “the international stage” as the space where Sweden “can make a difference” on issues such as democracy and human
rights and then linking that to the UN, Aydin reaffirms the importance of international organizations for the expression of Sweden’s autobiographical narrative. Secondly, the claim that Sweden should be a “driving force” within the UN to make sure that states do not circumvent their responsibility regarding human rights corresponds particularly well with the moral superpower-element.

Another organization that figures as a significant Other for Sweden in the material, is NATO. Interestingly, several of the policymakers from the conservative parties while in government emphasize the democratic aspects of NATO when describing the defense alliance. These democratic ideals are described as something that Sweden has in common with NATO and its member states. By pointing to democracy as the value through which Sweden identifies with NATO is arguably constructing a bridge of continuity between Sweden’s identity as a state that stands up for democracy and the future membership in NATO. For example, Ann-Sofie Malm (M) mentions democracy as one of the values that Sweden share with the alliance:

“The fifth strength is our values. Freedom, justice and democracy are values that we in the Nordics share with NATO” (Prot. 22/23: 79, anf. 33, my translation).

Another illustrative example is the following quote by John E. Weinerhall (M):

“It would be very unfortunate if Sweden, as the only democratic state at the Baltic sea, is left outside the alliance for longer than absolutely necessary.” (Prot. 22/23: 79, anf. 99, my translation)

By saying that Sweden would be the only democracy at the Baltic sea, left outside the defense alliance, Weinerhall is constructing an image of NATO as an indisputable and obvious organization for democracies. It portrays NATO as an alliance that every democratic state must be part of. In light of this depiction, joining NATO suddenly appears to be in accordance with Sweden’s autobiographical narrative as it is a way to stand up for democracy. Along the same lines, Katarina Tolgfors (M) argues that due to Sweden’s status as “one of the most stable and democratic countries in the world”, it is Sweden’s responsibility to join NATO in order to “protect other democracies” (Prot. 22/23: 79, anf. 110, my translation).

**Systemic level / Notion of the international order**
On the systemic level, Sweden’s notion of a democratic world where human rights are respected is described as under attack from authoritarian states, not least from Russia. However, while worry is expressed, the vision of such a world is not abandoned or compromised, which indicates consistency with the moral superpower-element. In the following quote, Foreign Minister for the social democratic government Ann Linde paints a dark picture of the state of democracy in the world. Notwithstanding, because of this negative development, she reaffirms the government’s commitment to strengthen democracy and human rights worldwide:

“For the fifth consecutive year, we are seeing more countries moving in an authoritarian direction than in a democratic direction. [...] The Government’s Drive for Democracy therefore continues with full force. More attention must be paid to the lack of democracy and respect for human rights in the world of work globally.” (Regeringskansliet, 2022)

Recalling another characteristic of the element’s systemic level, i.e. the notion that poverty reduction, democratization and the spread of human rights lead to a more secure and peaceful world, there is arguably some continuity in the material. In the quote below, Ann Linde (S) links the spread of democracy with Sweden’s security interests:

“When anti-democratic forces gain ground, Sweden’s development assistance will, with unwavering ambition, remain a counterweight. More democratic societies make the world a better place – and increase security in Sweden.” (Regeringskansliet, 2022).

Similar associations are made by conservative policymakers during the subsequent government. For instance, Magdalena Thuresson (M) asserts that values such as democracy are important in themselves but also instrumental for peace and security in the world:

“Democracy, human freedom and rights, and the principles of the rule of law are valuable in themselves. They are also crucial for peace, security, and development in our world.” (Prot. 22/23:43, anf. 35, my translation)

Noteworthy is that, in line with how NATO is portrayed on the intersubjective level, policymakers also describe the alliance as the actor most capable of counteracting the democratic recession globally. Given this portrayal, Sweden’s application for membership in
NATO transforms into a particularly important step in order to resist this dark global development:

“NATO is today the primary defender of the free and democratic world. Taking this step [applying for membership in NATO] is particularly important as we are witnessing a clear democratic regression globally, with various authoritarian states violating the territorial integrity of other countries with everything from military provocations to direct attacks.”
(Prot 22/23: 79, anf. 75, Markus Wiechel, SD, my translation)

In conclusion, the most representative narration in relation to Sweden’s perspective of the international order is the account of a negative, democratic development accompanied by a firm affirmation that Sweden will work tirelessly to counter it. Plausibly, this resonates adequately with the moral superpower-element. In the foreign policy declaration from 2023, Foreign Minister Tobias Billström (M) claims Sweden will do everything possible to make a democratic world revive:

“It is often said that democratic development is like a pendulum. With war in our neighbourhood and authoritarian forces starting to see their chance, the pendulum is currently swinging away. But we will do all that we can to hasten the resurgence of democracy and freedom.” (Regeringskansliet, 2023)
4.2. The mediator

*Internal level / The Self*

On the internal level, the material has few references to Sweden as a provider of peace and almost no description of Sweden as a mediator or a bridge-builder, indicating a lack of continuity with the mediator-element. Nevertheless, some exceptions are found, especially in narrations by the social democratic minister Ann Linde. In the foreign policy declaration, Linde stresses that Sweden’s efforts for peacebuilding continues to be critical and that Sweden will work for peacebuilding and mediation through the multilateral system (Regeringskansliet, 2022). Naturally, Linde also defends Sweden’s former neutrality doctrine on the basis that it has been important for the “stability, peace and reduced tensions” that has characterized the Nordic region (21/22: 128, Anf. 4). Perhaps the remark most aligned with the element is the statement that “Diplomacy will remain our [Sweden’s] first line of defense...” depicting Sweden as a state that does not resort to military violence so easily but always opt for peaceful measures, such as diplomacy, in order to solve conflicts. On the other hand, while not necessarily being opposed to the mediator-element, the portrayal of Sweden as a provider of security is seemingly growing at the expense of the depiction of Sweden as a provider of peace. For example, in the capacity of Prime Minister, Magdalena Andersson emphasizes that Sweden is a “qualified security producer” (Prot. 21/22: 114, anf. 1, my translation).

Considering how Sweden’s stance on nuclear weapons is portrayed, there are seemingly both continuities and inconsistencies on the internal level, somewhat dependent on party affiliation as will be demonstrated below. In the foreign policy declaration from 2022, Foreign Minister Ann Linde (S) states that:

> “Sweden will remain a strong voice for disarmament, non-proliferation and arms control even as a NATO member.” (Regeringskansliet, 2022)

The description of Sweden as a “strong voice” portrays the country as a state that will not only take a stance against nuclear weapons but also intends to actively and vocally strive for disarmament and non-proliferation. On the other hand, the remark that Sweden will remain this strong voice even as a NATO member reveals the intrinsic tension between the membership and Sweden’s identity as an advocate in the area. However, other remarks that...
concretize Sweden’s commitment for disarmament and non-proliferation reinforce the depiction of Sweden as an advocate in this regard:

“Within the Stockholm Initiative, Sweden and 15 other countries have proposed 22 concrete and constructive steps for nuclear disarmament and a package of measures to reduce the risk of nuclear weapons use – an area of growing importance.” (Regeringskansliet, 2022)

Moreover, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson expresses a clear stance against nuclear weapons on Swedish territory which arguably signals some continuation of the mediator-element:

“We [social democrats] think that Sweden should clearly declare that we do not want nuclear weapons or permanent bases on Swedish territory.” (Prot. 21/22: 114, anf. 1, my translation)

Considering the conservative government’s term in office, the commitment to disarmament and non-proliferation expressed by the social democrats is at first glance reaffirmed by policymakers from the conservative parties. The quote below, extracted from the foreign policy declaration from 2023, illustrates this:

“Sweden remains committed to arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation. As part of this, we will continue to actively participate in the Stockholm Initiative for Nuclear Disarmament.” (Regeringskansliet, 2023)

Arguably, words such as “continue” and “actively participate” in relation to the Stockholm Initiative, maintains the image of Sweden as not only a passive bystander but as an engaged participant. Despite this seeming consistency with the mediator-element, the same declaration also conveys a less convincing and confident tone in relation to Sweden’s stance towards nuclear weapons:

“Like Norway and Denmark in their time, Sweden is joining NATO without reservations. However, like the other Nordic countries, we do not foresee having nuclear weapons on our own territory in peacetime.” (Regeringskansliet, 2023).
Above it is communicated that Sweden is entering NATO unconditionally but with the modest reservation that Sweden does not foresee harboring nuclear weapons on Swedish soil, - at least not in peacetime. It could be argued that this is a shift from Andersson’s firm statement that Sweden “should clearly declare” a resistance to having nuclear weapons on Swedish territory (Prot. 21/22: 114, anf. 1). Billström’s more modest statement portrays Sweden as less determined on the issue of disarmament and non-proliferation than the mediator-element suggests.

**Intersubjective level / Significant Others**

Recalling the mediator-element’s emphasis on international organizations with which Sweden has a shared ambition in peace-related issues, little indication of continuity is observed in the material. It appears that inconsistencies from the internal level are feeding into the intersubjective level, generating similar discontinuities to the element. First of all, less attention is paid to what Sweden can provide and do within these organizations in terms of peace and more focus is directed towards the mutual exchange of security and strength. This pattern is especially pronounced in depictions of NATO and Sweden’s future membership. Different versions of the phrase “NATO strengthens Sweden, and Sweden strengthens NATO...” (Prot. 21/22: 114, anf. 9, Magdalena Andersson, S, my translation) is repeated innumerable times.

Nevertheless, there are examples where the narration mirrors the mediator-element to at least some extent. As already mentioned in relation to the internal level, Ann Linde (S) points out that Sweden will work for peacebuilding and mediation within the multilateral system with a particular emphasis on the UN (Regeringskansliet, 2022). In the same declaration she also refers to OSCE as an important platform through which Europe’s deteriorated security situation can be managed. Here, Linde describes how Sweden, through its presidency in the organization, has reinforced OSCE’s capacity for dialogue which could be interpreted as somewhat in line with the mediator-element:

“We have a number of security policy tools we can use to respond to the deteriorating security situation in Europe. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is one of them [...]. We worked to strengthen the OSCE’s role as a platform for dialogue and accountability.” (Regeringskansliet, 2022).
Moving on to the conservative government, there is less emphasis on what Sweden can contribute with in terms of peace. In the foreign policy declaration from 2023, Tobias Billström only mentions peace in relation to the government’s policy one time, as one out of several issues that Sweden will strive for within the UN (Regeringskansliet, 2023). Instead, he emphasizes Sweden’s future security influence and contribution in relation to NATO:

“By joining NATO, we will strengthen our security policy influence and our contribution to security and stability in the entire Euro-Atlantic area.”
(Regeringskansliet, 2023)

The same message is echoed by other conservative policymakers as well:

“Joining NATO will make us an important player in the alliance's defense around the Baltic Sea. Our geographic position makes us a key player in building a credible defense against Russian aggression and other possible threats.” (Prot. 22/23: 79, anf. 110, Katarina Tolgfors, M, my translation)

Furthermore, the issue of nuclear weapons is brought up also in relation to Sweden’s significant Others. Following Billström’s modest stance regarding nuclear weapons on Swedish territory, accounted for on the internal level, an even more permissive stance is conveyed in relation to NATO’s arsenal:

“Nuclear weapons constitute the ultimate part of NATO's deterrence doctrine. As long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance. However, this alliance also has an explicit goal to work to create conditions for a world free of nuclear weapons. In its nuclear doctrine, NATO has also stated that the conditions under which the use of nuclear weapons might be considered are highly unlikely.” (Prot 22/23: 79, anf. 59, Tobias Billström, M, my translation).

In the above quote, Billström describes NATO’s deterrence doctrine and asserts that the alliance’s possession of nuclear weapons is conditioned on the very existence of the weapons. The absence of any expressed reluctance towards such a policy could be interpreted as an alteration of the narrative, as it conveys a silent acceptance of the doctrine. Moreover, Billström claims that NATO considers the conditions under which nuclear weapons could be used as highly unlikely as if that could be considered a mitigating circumstance. Arguably,
such implicit messages could also be understood as inconsistent with the narrative, considering the element’s portrayal of Sweden as a state opposed to the mere existence of nuclear weapons, not only the usage of them. Billström’s implicit approval is expressed more explicitly by Defense Minister Pål Jonson: “I think that NATO’s approach to nuclear weapons is reasonable.” (Prot 22/23: 79, anf. 68, my translation).

While most discontinuities are identified in accounts of NATO, it is also in relation to the alliance that many of the continuities are found. Although NATO is first and foremost described in relation to security it is also depicted as an important alliance for peace. For example, Anna Starbrink (L) claims that “No organization has contributed to peace and security in the world like NATO” (Prot 22/23: 79, anf. 44, my translation). In the same vein, Margareta Cederfelt (M) asserts that “For the past 70 years, NATO has contributed to peace and stability in Europe but also in other parts of the world” (Prot. 22/23: 38, anf. 71, my translation). It can be contended that the association between the defense alliance and peace makes membership align with the mediator-element.

Another frequently mentioned significant Other is the European Union. Here, references to peace are given an even greater weight. For example, Yusuf Aydin (KD) insists that “EU is our absolute most important tool to preserve the peace” (Prot. 23/24: 43, anf. 7, my translation). In relation to the EU, there are also some examples, however modest, of how Sweden’s efforts for disarmament and non-proliferation are described to be managed through international organizations:

“Sweden will be a committed force, acting constructively, both nationally and as part of the EU. We will safeguard and strengthen the NPT in order to achieve concrete progress in all three pillars of the agreement: disarmament, non-proliferation and the peaceful use of nuclear energy.” (Prot 22/23: 79, anf. 61, Tobias Billström, M, my translation).

Systemic level / Perspective of the international order

Bearing in mind that the element’s systemic level is based on Sweden’s vision of a world order based on international law, without nuclear weapons and where conflict is managed through diplomacy and dialogue - the material indicates mostly continuities. Particularly the social democratic government has a firm grip of the vision of a denuclearized international order. In the foreign policy declaration, Foreign Minister Ann Linde asserts that “the common
goal is a world free of nuclear weapons” (Regeringskansliet, 2022) which constructs continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative. Another indication of consistency is Linde highlighting the importance of dialogue:

“The conditions for dialogue and conflict resolution have changed profoundly since 24 February, but the need for dialogue remains. And the OSCE is an important forum for this when circumstances allow.” (Regeringskansliet, 2022).

On the one hand, Linde points out that measures such as dialogue and conflict resolution have lost some relevance in the face of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, she also affirms that the need for dialogue remains, thus not abandoning the mediator-element’s portrayal of diplomacy and peaceful measures as solutions to instability and insecurity. In less explicit ways, similar messages about deteriorating conditions for cooperation but growing need for the same, are communicated by representatives from parties of the conservative government:

“Unfortunately I can note that Russia’s war has entailed that cooperation in several international organizations functions suboptimally […] This does not mean that the organizations should be dismantled or that collaboration with other countries and platforms is not important. Russia’s blockade of organizations must be understood as an indication of the organizations’ importance.” (Prot. 23/24:43, anf. 32, Margareta Cederfelt, M, my translation)

In the same vein, Yusuf Aydin (KD) argues that Russia’s war in Ukraine and the escalation between Israel and Hamas have generated “greater need for dialogue and cooperation” (Prot. 23/24: 43: anf. 34, my translation). He also points out that, due to times of great insecurity, more resources need to be directed to international organizations (ibid).

“International cooperation is perhaps our most important tool for a stable and safe world. Through dialogue and cooperation with other countries, we strengthen our security and safety and also get the opportunity to promote the values that are important to us on a global arena.” (Prot. 22/23: 43, Anf. 34, Yusuf Aydin, KD, my translation)
While most policymakers reconfirm their commitment to a rules based order, a few portray international law as something of the past and instead suggest greater deterrence as the way forward. This view is perhaps best summarized by John E. Winerhall’s (M) claim that “if you want peace you must be prepared for war” (Prot. 22/23: 79, anf. 99, my translation). A more elaborate illustration of this notion is put forward by Aron Emilsson (SD):

“In conclusion, it is important to state that the world has fundamentally changed. That it would return to a more rules-based world order is unfortunately not likely in the near, foreseeable future. Unfortunately, it rather looks like the development is heading in the other direction. A geopolitically fragmented and divided world and a world where strength comes before right is unfortunately a reality we have to face in many respects. In such a reality, a strengthened deterrence military capability is required, and through NATO membership this capability will increase, both for us and for our neighboring countries.” (22/23: 79, anf. 1, my translation).
4.3. Discussion of findings

Considering the moral superpower-element, there is reasonable continuity in the material analyzed, especially on the internal and systemic level of the model. On the former, the portrayal of Sweden as a state standing up for democracy, human rights and international law is consistent. In a similar manner, Sweden is continuously depicted as a generous donor of humanitarian and development aid. Some consistency is also identified on the intersubjective level, where people in need and the organizations through which Sweden channels its assistance continue to constitute significant Others. However, this portrayal limps a bit as some policymakers shift the focus of Swedish aid to also serve “Swedish interests”, representing Sweden as less altruistic than the autobiographical narrative suggests. Another potential inconsistency with the narrative is the reduced geographical focus, with an overwhelming focus on Sweden’s closest neighbors at the expense of attention to the Global South. However, the extent to which this can be understood as a discontinuity is not evident, considering the struggle revealed by the material with some policymakers arguing against this narrowing geographical focus. Nonetheless, it could be argued that the consistency on the internal level is crucial for the maintenance of the narrative in the face of growing discontinuities on the intersubjective level. In other words, by insisting on Sweden's position as a leading altruist on the internal level, the autobiographical narrative is maintained despite the increasing focus on “Swedish interests” on the intersubjective level.

Interestingly, on the intersubjective level, NATO is portrayed as an actor with which Sweden shares values such as democracy and human rights. Arguably, that Sweden is identified with NATO through these values enables the incorporation of the alliance into the autobiographical narrative. By activating the democratic aspects of the moral superpower-element in relation to representations of NATO, a biographical continuity to the autobiographical narrative is constructed, merging the past non-alignment with the future allyship. Noteworthy is that, a similar process is occurring on the systemic level as NATO is portrayed as the actor most important for the resistance towards the global anti-democratic development described. In addition to the counterweight that NATO represents, efforts to strengthen democracy worldwide are described as crucial for this resistance. Thus, despite the rather dark picture painted of the world, the insistence on a democratic and rules-based world order with human rights at its core is not abandoned or compromised. Rather policymakers
reaffirm their dedication to do everything they can to make such a world revive which clearly mirrors the moral superpower-element and thus creates continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative despite the negative democratic development globally.

With regards to the mediator-element, somewhat less continuity is identified compared to the moral superpower-element. While concepts of security and peace are not necessarily opposed, the material indicates that the former is becoming increasingly pronounced at the expense of the latter. This shift in the narrative is noted on all three levels of the mediator-element. On the internal level, Sweden is seldom illustrated as a mediator or a bridge-builder that contributes to global peace but rather as a “key player” in building of defense in the Baltic sea and as a “security producer”. This discursive shift is feeding into the intersubjective level where the usual portrayal of international organizations as platforms through which Sweden can promote peace is downplayed. Instead, Sweden’s relations to these organizations is to a greater extent talked about in terms of a mutual exchange of security. It could be argued that this overall modification suggests a departure from Sweden’s autobiographical narrative.

However, while this pattern is especially pronounced in relation to depictions of Sweden’s future membership in NATO, the security alliance is also described as an important actor for peace, not only in Europe but on a global scale. Arguably, this depiction counteracts the discursive tendency of less attention to what international organizations do for peace and thus, maintains some consistency to the mediator-element. In addition, it reduces the biographical gap between Sweden’s non-alignment and future membership in the military alliance. If NATO is an actor important for global peace, and Sweden is a state acting on peace-related issues - then it suddenly seems logical that Sweden would join NATO. On the other hand, it is in relation to NATO where the depiction of Sweden’s stance on nuclear weapons is beginning to limp. At first sight, a firm commitment to disarmament and non-proliferation is conveyed on the internal level. However, upon closer examination of the intersubjective level, several policymakers and representatives also express a more permissive stance towards nuclear weapons with reference to NATO and Sweden’s security needs.

On the systemic level there is a remaining rhetorical commitment to the maintenance of a rules-based order where conflict is solved through diplomacy, dialogue, cooperation and established international institutions. Moreover, a world free of nuclear weapons is still
described as an ambition for Sweden. A few policymakers express less confidence in the efficiency of international law and instead describe deterrence as more reliable. While this portrayal is notable, it should arguably not be interpreted as a disruption to the element as it is not reflected in other representatives’ or policymakers’ discourse. However, despite the relative continuation on the systemic level, the overall modifications on the internal and intersubjective levels, as well as the contradictory depictions of Sweden’s stance towards nuclear weapons, indicates the opposite. Especially the lacking and sometimes absent depiction of Sweden as a promoter of peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict prevention and conflict resolution constitutes a problem for the continuity of the autobiographical narrative.

Following the insights outlined above it is possible to make some preliminary suggestions regarding the development of Sweden’s identity. Bearing in mind the autobiographical narrative’s constitutive role for a state's identity, the analysis points towards some continuation and some disruptions concerning Sweden’s identity. Seemingly, humanitarian and development aid as well as solidarity and sympathy for people in need will probably continue to characterize Sweden’s identity in the international sphere. On the contrary, many aspects related to Sweden’s efforts for peace in the world, such as peacebuilding, peacekeeping, conflict resolution and mediation, will possibly lose their relevance - perhaps in favor of security-related issues. Especially, the role as an advocate for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation will probably become less explicit. Lastly, the downplayed attention to the Global South, in favor of Sweden’s closest neighborhood, might be an indication of further and more accelerated Europeanization and Nordicness, previously identified by Brommesson (2018, see section 2.1.). Necessary to recall is that these suggestions are based on an analysis merely accounting for the intra-subjective process of identity construction, i.e. through the autobiographical narrative. Since identities are shaped through an intersubjective process, i.e. that its construction is also dependent on other states’ understanding and recognition of the same (Eberle & Handl, 2022: 44), these suggestions must be understood as incomplete conclusions.

The generation of the findings was enabled by the three-layered model. As Eberle and Handl indicated themselves (2020: 47), the split of the narrative into three layers facilitated the analytical process as it uncovered complexities. Considering the analysis in question, the separation into three layers revealed interesting dynamics, for example related to Sweden’s stance towards nuclear weapons. As I have accounted for on the mediator–element’s internal
level, relative continuation was observed as Sweden was quite coherently portrayed as a committed advocate for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. However, on the intersubjective level, much more discontinuity was identified as Sweden’s stance towards NATO’s possession of nuclear weapons was rather permissive. The revelation of this kind of divergence is arguably central for the understanding of how NATO is discursively incorporated into Sweden’s autobiographical narrative - by deactivating the advocacy against nuclear weapons on the intersubjective level and maintaining the advocacy on the internal level. On the other hand, it could be argued that Sweden’s autobiographical narrative as it is comprehended in this thesis, is too vast and includes too many features for the model to be adequately useful. Perhaps, the model would have been more fruitful to the analytical process if the case was delimited, for example by only looking at NATO as Sweden’s significant Other and not all the various significant Others included in this thesis.

Another central component to comment on regards the selection of material. Particularly, questions arise regarding the extent to which policymakers and governmental representatives, for example Foreign Ministers, can be considered as “equals” in terms of "narrative entrepreneurs". It could be suggested that, for example, Foreign Ministers possess more influence over the construction of the state’s autobiographical narrative. Also, the incentives to maintain continuity and stability to the state’s identity must arguably be greater for representatives of the government since they symbolize "Sweden" to a higher degree. In retrospect, I suggest these two groups of narrative entrepreneurs are not interchangeable. Despite this, no notable differences between policymakers and government representatives’ narration have been identified in the material on which the analysis is based. Consequently, the findings and insights of the study should arguably be taken into account - evidently with the limitations accounted for.
5. Conclusion

This thesis originated in the momentous decision by the Swedish government to apply for membership in NATO, putting an end to what had constituted Sweden’s foreign policy identity for over half a century. In order to make sense of this historical shift and its entailing implications for Sweden’s identity in the international sphere I turned to the literature on ontological security studies and autobiographical narratives. Anchored in this literature, a theoretical expectation was developed, assuming that there would be continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative despite NATO-membership standing in stark contrast to the state’s identity. According to the underpinning logic, states need to experience continuity to their identities to remain ontologically secure and this continuity can be maintained through the state’s autobiographical narrative. Hence, this thesis set out to examine if there was continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative despite the application for membership in NATO. Moreover, it intended to map how the potential continuity was discursively constructed. The aim was to, on the one hand be able to strengthen or weaken the theory and on the other hand to say something about the development of Sweden’s identity during a time of considerable reorientation of the country’s foreign and security policy.

Following the discussion of findings, several conclusions can be made. Overall, the material manifested moderate continuity to Sweden’s autobiographical narrative, despite the application for membership in NATO. As was anticipated, this continuity was discursively constructed through activation and deactivation of different components and on different layers of the narrative. While aspects related to the moral superpower-element were characterized by reasonable continuity, dimensions intrinsic to the mediator-element were to a greater extent adjusted or downplayed. Interestingly, some of the most prominent adjustments were directly related to NATO, primarily the issue of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, NATO was also portrayed as an inherently democratic alliance with a long history of contributing to peace in the world. As have been accounted for in the discussion of the findings, this portrayal served to incorporate NATO-membership into Sweden’s autobiographical narrative.

Tying the generated insights from the analysis back to the aim of the study, this thesis has, to some extent, strengthened existing theories within the literature on ontological security studies and autobiographical narratives. In accordance with previous studies, the case of
Sweden further demonstrates how policymakers and government representatives can maintain continuity to the state's autobiographical narrative, despite dramatic reorientations of its foreign and security policy. By downplaying some aspects of the narrative and activating others, the foreign policy change can be incorporated into the state's autobiography without complete rewriting of the story. Nevertheless, Sweden’s autobiographical narrative, as it is comprehended in this thesis, was not fully synchronizing with the organization and conceptualization of the three layered model. Consequently, the analytical framework was seemingly unable to reach its full potential in this study.

Considering the second aim, this thesis has shed light on Sweden’s identity in the international sphere during a time of considerable reorientation of the country’s foreign and security policy. The thesis suggests that Sweden’s identity will continuously be characterized by the portrayal of Sweden as a generous donor of foreign aid that stands up for democracy, human rights and international law - at least to some extent. On the contrary, the depiction of Sweden as an advocate for nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation as well as a promoter of peace-related issues will have less influence on the construction of Sweden’s identity. Yet, the most important finding regarding Sweden’s identity is arguably more general. As previous research has indicated, Sweden’s foreign policy has been subject to few dramatic alterations throughout modern history. Instead it has been characterized by relative consistency, even following governmental transitions (Brommesson & Ekengren, 2022: 218). This thesis suggests that dramatic transformations of Sweden’s foreign affairs can take place without necessarily leading to a complete revision of the state's autobiographical narrative, and consequently nor its identity.

Nonetheless, as already touched upon in the discussion of findings, the construction of a state’s identity also relies on other states’ understanding and recognition of the same. Thus, in order to be able to draw fully-developed conclusions regarding Sweden’s identity, other states’ attitudes and recognitions, or lack thereof, towards Sweden’s autobiographical narrative must arguably be identified and analyzed. Accordingly, this is my suggestion for future studies on Sweden’s identity in the international sphere. Suggestively, such a study could be conducted by mapping the official agreements which Sweden enters with other states as well as official statements from other states’ representatives regarding Sweden. As a complement, a discourse analysis about what is said and written about Sweden’s foreign policy in international news media could be conducted. Lastly, it is important to note that the
construction and adjustment of a state’s autobiographical narrative is not a finite process. Thus, the development of Sweden’s identity will therefore continue, and so will the study of the same.
Bibliography

Literature:


Empirical sources:


