

# Small states and the dilemma of geopolitics: role change in Finland and Sweden

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On 18 May 2022, Finland and Sweden formally applied for membership of NATO.<sup>1</sup> At the stroke of a pen, both countries abolished their longstanding policies of military non-alignment (stretching back over 200 years, in the case of Sweden), which not only defined their security policies but also constituted a central building block of their world-views and sense of Self.<sup>2</sup> Although there is little doubt that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 constituted the tipping-point for these decisions, Finland and Sweden have been growing increasingly concerned over the wider impact of the geopolitical shift in international politics on their traditional international identity and longstanding foreign policy goals.<sup>3</sup> In small liberal states such as Finland and Sweden, the geopolitical shift—with the ensuing weakening of the rules-based international order—poses a dilemma for governing elites, which feel compelled to undertake a reassessment of foreign policy in the face of external challenges largely outside their control without

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<sup>1</sup> NATO, 'Finland and Sweden submit applications to join NATO', 18 May 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_195468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_195468.htm). (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 19 Oct. 2023.)

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren and Anna Michalski, *Sweden's foreign and security policy in a time of flux*, UI Brief 7/22 (Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2022), <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2022/ui-brief-no.-7-2022.pdf>; Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren and Anna Michalski, 'Sweden's policy of neutrality: success through flexibility?', in Caroline de la Porte, Jaakko Kauko, Daniel Nohrstedt, Paul 't Hart and Bent Sofus Tranöy, eds, *Successful public policy: lessons from the Nordic countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); David Arter, 'From Finlandisation and post-Finlandisation to the end of Finlandisation? Finland's road to a NATO application', *European Security* 32: 2, 2023, pp. 171–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2113062>.

<sup>3</sup> Government of Sweden, *Statement of foreign policy 2021* (Stockholm: Government Offices of Sweden, 2021), <https://www.government.se/speeches/2021/02/statement-of-foreign-policy>; Finnish Government, *Government report on Finnish foreign and security policy* (Helsinki: Finnish Government, 2020), p. 16, <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/162515>; Douglas Brommesson, Ann-Marie Ekengren and Anna Michalski, 'From variation to convergence in turbulent times—foreign and security policy choices among the Nordics 2014–2023', *European Security*, publ. online June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2023.2221185>; Zhen Han and Thazha Varkey Paul, 'China's rise and balance of power politics', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 13: 1, 2020, pp. 1–26; G. John Ikenberry, 'The end of liberal international order?', *International Affairs* 94: 1, 2018, pp. 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>; Harald Edinger, 'Offensive ideas: structural realism, classical realism and Putin's war on Ukraine', *International Affairs* 98: 6, 2022, pp. 1873–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia217>.

jeopardizing national autonomy and deep-seated social identities. The decisions of Finland and Sweden to join NATO are therefore part of a bigger shift away from their traditional brands of autonomous foreign policy to integrate more deeply into western alliances, thereby affecting their longstanding foreign policy roles.

Despite sharing deep concerns about rising security threats in northern Europe, the decisions of Finland and Sweden to radically reorientate national security policy by aligning with NATO took surprisingly different trajectories in the two countries. In Finland, the decision-making was characterized by elite consensus and strong public support, while in Sweden the domestic process was complex, as parts of the elite and public remained unconvinced about the necessity of NATO membership for increased security and resented its implications for Sweden's reputation abroad as a normative internationalist. The differences in domestic policy-making regarding the NATO decisions demonstrate that national elites must deal with the complex dilemma of reassessing longstanding foreign policy roles with due regard to specific national circumstances, beyond assessments of security threats, material resources and capabilities. To make sense of the variation in the processes of foreign policy role change in Finland and Sweden, we turn to role theory, because of its ability to elucidate the complexities of foreign policy role change in the domestic arena. Moreover, a role-theoretical analysis enables us to link elements such as elite perceptions, social identity and tradition with formal constraints, such as institutions and procedures, in order to trace how the domestic elites navigate domestic processes of role change.

In this article, we have chosen to focus on the decisions of Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership as critical cases of domestic role change undertaken by national elites in a context of tangible external security threats which have led to a radical reorientation of longstanding foreign and security policies. Through these cases, we demonstrate that the process of adjusting foreign policy roles in the domestic setting is more complex than is typically held by system-oriented predictions, and the outcome can often defy predictions of rational foreign policy-making.<sup>4</sup> We contend that the reasons for this complexity is that foreign policy role change is negotiated through the constraints of formal and informal institutions and practices in the domestic setting which may lead to role contestation, possibly even role conflict, especially if longstanding national role conceptions and world-views are challenged. The theoretical contribution of the article is situated in the conceptualization of domestic elites' ability to interpret and act on dilemmas caused by the weakening of the rules-based international system, and their handling of the process of domestic role change in a context characterized by material and immaterial constraints.

To understand how Finnish and Swedish elites have dealt with the dilemma of role change, we build a model that allows us to trace the social mechanisms influencing foreign role enactment, from the international to the domestic level and back again to the international level, where adjusted or new roles are achieved.

<sup>4</sup> See, among others, Anders Wivel, 'The grand strategies of small states', in Thierry Balzacq and Ronald R. Krebs, eds, *The Oxford handbook of grand strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

The model's wider purpose is to analytically visualize the various strategies deployed by elites to balance internal expectations against external challenges in the domestic processes of role change. In times of geopolitical shifts, conceptual maps, such as the one presented here, can be helpful to practitioners and academics alike to understand the dilemmas facing small states and middle-sized powers—which are both dependent on a stable rules-based multilateral order and vulnerable to security threats, in both cases to a higher degree than major or great powers.

This article is organized as follows. First, we outline the predicament of small liberal states in a weakening international order. Then, we explore the international system as a hierarchical social order in which states are allocated role positions through the enactment of their foreign policy roles. Next, we conceptualize the pressure on national role conceptions through an analytical construct in two parts, depicting the dynamic interplay between an international system in flux and the domestic process of role change through national action strategies. The model's usefulness is illustrated by tracing foreign policy role change in Finland and Sweden. We conclude by addressing the liberal small-state dilemma and the conceptualization of the complex process of domestic foreign policy role change in Finland and Sweden.

## **Small liberal states in a weakening international order**

The literature on small states leaves us with a fragmented understanding of what a small state really is, in part because such states are very different from each other. In the following, we review literature which typically refers to advanced small states, many of which are liberal democracies.<sup>5</sup>

Typically, small states are defined in terms of their limited material capabilities through proxies, such as population size, gross domestic product or military resources, which restrict their ability to influence international politics and give rise to behaviour which is more restrained, compared to that of middle or great powers.<sup>6</sup> Recently, small states scholarship has put increased emphasis on the resourcefulness of small states to devise foreign policy in line with their objectives and interests.<sup>7</sup> Some researchers have even pointed to their 'smartness' in carving out a space for themselves in international politics to perform foreign policy roles, for instance as mediators, in order to acquire reputational assets and status.<sup>8</sup> In this vein, Neumann and Gstöhl argue that the limited material resources

<sup>5</sup> Baldur Thorhallsson and Anders Wivel, 'Small states in the European Union: what do we know and what would we like to know?', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19: 4, 2006, pp. 651–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570601003502>; Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, 'Small states: concepts and theories', in Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel, eds, *Handbook on the politics of small states* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020), pp. 2–19; Tom Long, *A small state's guide to influence in world politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel, 'Introduction', in Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel, eds, *Small states in Europe: challenges and opportunities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), pp. 19–28.

<sup>7</sup> Long, *A small state's guide to influence in world politics*, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> Christopher S. Browning, 'Small, smart and salient? Rethinking identity in the small states literature', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19: 4, 2006, pp. 669–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557570601003536>; Rita Abrahamsen, Louise Riis Andersen and Ole Jacob Sending, 'Introduction: making liberal international-

of small states predispose them to 'favor discourses that institutionalize rules and norms, such as international law, international regimes, and international institutions' as part of strategies to enhance stability in the interactions between states in the international system.<sup>9</sup> Small states therefore seek to expand their influence over great powers through international organizations and alliances, even if this may imply a reduction in their autonomy.<sup>10</sup> The choice to become a member of a regional or international organization has been perceived as an autonomy/integration dilemma, in that small states need to balance the advantages of integration against a formal loss of room for manoeuvre.<sup>11</sup> However, this dichotomy is contingent on the small state's perception of (in)security, as shown, for instance, in the case of Estonia seeking membership of NATO through a determined quest following its independence in 1991 to secure its status as an independent state.<sup>12</sup> According to Haugevik and Rieker, small states' attachment to the 'stability, order, and opportunities' provided by international institutions also makes them 'warier about changes in these structures', as a weakening of the rules-based order can be detrimental to the system's ability to rein in great power politics.<sup>13</sup>

In this article, we have chosen to illustrate the small states' dilemma caused by a weakening rules-based order and heightened security threats in northern Europe by tracing the decision of Finland and Sweden to seek membership of NATO and hence to give up their military non-alignment affecting their foreign policy roles, respectively, as a communicator between East and West (Finland) and a normative internationalist (Sweden).<sup>14</sup> Just as the actions of Finland and Sweden elucidate this dilemma, other small liberal states may perceive equally thorny predicaments when challenged by revisionist powers, as witnessed, for instance, in New Zealand, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Belgium. Middle powers, too, such as the Netherlands, Canada and Australia, are known to experience dilemmas of this kind.

## The weakening international order and small states' foreign policy roles

International orders are constituted by an underlying structure of institutions, rules, norms, beliefs and discourses. However, these structures do not in themselves

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ism great again?', *International Journal* 74: 1, 2019, pp. 5–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702019827050>; Iver B. Neumann and Sieglinde Gstöhl, 'Introduction: Lilliputians in Gulliver's world?' in Christine Ingebritsen, Iver B. Neumann, Sieglinde Gstöhl and Jessica Beyer, eds, *Small states in International Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), pp. 3–36 at pp. 17, 19–23; Benjamin de Carvalho and Iver B. Neumann, eds, *Small state status seeking: Norway's quest for international standing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Kai He and Huiyun Feng, 'Role status and status-saving behaviour in world politics: the ASEAN case', *International Affairs* 98: 2, 2022, pp. 363–81, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab232>.

<sup>9</sup> Neumann and Gstöhl, 'Introduction', p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Laurent Goetschel, 'The foreign and security policy interests of small states in today's Europe', in Laurent Goetschel, ed., *Small states inside and outside the European Union* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1998), pp. 13–31 at p. 17; Long, *A small state's guide to influence in world politics*, p. 39–40.

<sup>11</sup> Kristin Haugevik and Pernille Rieker, 'Autonomy or integration? Small-state responses to a changing European security landscape', *Global Affairs* 33: 3, 2017, pp. 211–221 at pp. 215–216, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2017.1377625>.

<sup>12</sup> Long, *A small state's guide to influence in world politics*, pp. 102–6.

<sup>13</sup> Haugevik and Rieker, 'Autonomy or integration?', p. 216.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Lawler, 'Scandinavian exceptionalism and European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 35: 4, 1997, pp. 565–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00089>.

create an order. Rather, patterns of behaviour and recurrent practices of national foreign policy create a stable order, through a social hierarchy in which states play roles in accordance with their status: great powers, major powers, middle powers, small powers and rogue states.<sup>15</sup> The article's conceptual framework builds on the notion of roles as social positions shaped by both the structures of the international order and state interaction.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, strategies typically attributed to small states by IR realism theory, such as balancing and bandwagoning, are understood as patterns of behaviour underpinned by foreign policy roles.<sup>17</sup> Small states' efforts to adapt and adjust foreign policy roles are seen as instances of enactment of autonomous foreign policy, even when they take place under conditions of asymmetry.<sup>18</sup>

The ongoing transformation imbues the international system with a high degree of uncertainty.<sup>19</sup> The disruption of the international order presents small liberal states with two kinds of challenges. First, the weakening of the liberal world order caused by heightened geopolitics implies that the interaction among states has become competitive, thwarting the expectation that emerging powers would integrate into the rules-based international order. This is shown most conspicuously by the actions of Russia and China in Ukraine and the South China Sea respectively, rupturing state relations in the liberal order.<sup>20</sup> Great power competition over norms in the international order, such as between the US and China, poses a challenge to the normative-oriented foreign policy of small liberal states as their foreign policies '[revolve] around the building of multilateral institutions and global rule of law ... to advance key political, economic and security interests'.<sup>21</sup> Second, the weakening of the rules-based international order affects the national

<sup>15</sup> Bentley B. Allan, Srdjan Vucetic and Ted Hopf, 'The distribution of identity and the future of international order: China's hegemonic prospects', *International Organization* 72: 4, 2018, pp. 839–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818318000267>; K. J. Holsti, 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly* 14: 3, 1970, pp. 233–309, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3013584>.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Cameron G. Thies, *The United States, Israel, and the search for international order: socializing states* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Leslie E. Wehner and Cameron G. Thies, 'Role theory, narratives, and interpretation: the domestic contestation of roles', *International Studies Review* 16: 3, 2014, pp. 411–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12149>; He and Feng, 'Role status and status-saving behaviour in world politics'.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance Wehner and Thies, 'Role theory, narratives, and interpretation'; Leslie E. Wehner, 'Role expectations as foreign policy: South American secondary powers' expectations of Brazil as a regional power', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 11: 4, 2015, pp. 435–55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12048>.

<sup>18</sup> Leslie E. Wehner, 'Inter-role conflict, role strain and role play in Chile's relationship with Brazil', *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 35: 1, 2016, pp. 64–77 at p. 65, <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.12413>.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, Martha Finnemore, Kenneth Scheve, Kenneth A. Schultz and Erik Voeten, 'Preface', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. iii–iv, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818321000047>; David A. Lake, Lisa L. Martin and Thomas Risse, 'Challenges to the liberal order: reflections on *International Organization*', *International Organization* 75: 2, 2021, pp. 225–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Anna Michalski and Zhongqi Pan, 'Role dynamics in a structured relationship: the EU–China strategic partnership', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 55: 3, 2017, pp. 611–27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12505>; Cameron G. Thies, 'International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions: can role theory integrate IR theory and foreign policy analysis?', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8: 1, 2012, pp. 25–46 at p. 25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00170.x>; Thies, *The United States, Israel, and the search for international order*, pp. 35–6; Cameron G. Thies and Mark David Nieman, 'Explaining change in the international system: a role-theoretic approach to emerging powers', in Cameron G. Thies and Mark David Nieman, *Rising powers and foreign policy revisionism: understanding BRICS identity and behavior through time* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Abrahamsen et al., 'Making liberal internationalism great again?' p. 6; see also Steinmetz and Wivel, 'Introduction'.

role conceptions of small liberal states, as liberal norms and beliefs are constituent components of their social identities and guarantee their standing in international politics. As the international competition over norms intensifies, small states will find the space for international cooperation increasingly curtailed, which will affect their traditional foreign policy and international roles. To moderate role strain, states will try to regain control over the situation by finding consistency in new or adjusted roles.<sup>22</sup> A disconnect between the state's self-perception and its international roles may generate considerable pressure on the domestic elite to 're-establish coherence between their self-image and societal role-play' through strategies for role adaptation.<sup>23</sup> This leads us to the shrinking room for manoeuvre on the part of national elites to address the dilemma of balancing external pressure with expectation on the domestic level, a process which may result in role contestation, and possibly even role conflict.<sup>24</sup> Action strategies to deal with role strain may 'provoke dissonance and role inconsistency', but may also engender 'creativity' when national foreign policy elites find ways to adjust traditional foreign policy roles.<sup>25</sup>

## National role conceptions and domestic role contestation

A key tenet of role theory is national role conceptions. These are commonly defined as:

... the policy-makers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of the functions, if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or in a subordinate regional system.<sup>26</sup>

National role conceptions are complex entities which comprise a constitutive dimension that connects to the collective identity of the state and an action-oriented dimension which sets cognitive boundaries for the state's foreign policy. The constitutive dimension feeds into the domestic elite's world-views, the state's position in the larger community of states and foreign policy traditions shaped by perceptions of social identity.<sup>27</sup> The action dimension refers to 'how well a social actor performs a given role', i.e. the degree of congruence between an actor's foreign policy conduct and its role expectations, both internal and external.<sup>28</sup> The latter does not only denote the qualifications, or skills, of the national elite

<sup>22</sup> Thies and Nieman, 'Explaining change in the international system', p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Stephan Klose, 'Interactionist role theory meets ontological security studies: an exploration of synergies between socio-psychological approaches to the study of International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 26: 3, 2020, pp. 851–974 at p. 868, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119889401>.

<sup>24</sup> Wehner and Thies, 'Role theory, narratives, and interpretation'; Damian Strycharz, 'Role change and Russia's responses to upheavals in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 18: 4, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orac017>.

<sup>25</sup> Wehner and Thies, 'Role theory, narratives, and interpretation', p. 417.

<sup>26</sup> Holsti, 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', pp. 245–6.

<sup>27</sup> Marijke Breuning, 'Role theory research in International Relations: state of the art and blind spots', in Sebastian Harnisch, Cornelia Frank and Hanns W. Maull, eds, *Role theory in International Relations: approaches and analyses* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 16–35.

<sup>28</sup> Thies, *The United States, Israel, and the search for international order*, p. 31.

required to perform a specific role, but also the opportunities for it to do so. Domestic foreign policy elites therefore need to decide what conduct is commensurate with the state's foreign policy roles as they seek to reinterpret the constitutive parts of a state's international identity. The cohesiveness of a state's national role conception(s) influences its ability to conduct foreign policy. A variation too strong in the actor's role conception increases the likelihood of an intra-role conflict, while competing expectations among more than one role signal a potential inter-role conflict.<sup>29</sup> However, in domestic politics, there is seldom perfect consensus regarding the articulation of national role conceptions, and role contestation regarding the interpretation of foreign policy roles is common.<sup>30</sup> Such contestation may spill over into 'political contestation more broadly' as witnessed, for instance, in the UK over the decisions to go to war in Iraq or to withdraw from the European Union.<sup>31</sup>

Although the ability of role theory to move across levels of analysis to trace individual states' foreign policy behaviour has long been recognized, the significance of the domestic level as an arena for role-taking and role change remains under-researched.<sup>32</sup> Disregarding the domestic setting has fuelled criticism that national role conceptions are too often seen as expressions of consensual views on the state's international roles.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, not enough attention has been brought to domestic politics as an arena for elite-oriented role contestation, which in liberal democracies is situated in parliaments, coalition governments and the national bureaucracy.<sup>34</sup>

Below, we present a model which conceptualizes the process of adaptation of foreign policy of small liberal states, and we derive possible national action strategies for role change on the domestic level.<sup>35</sup> Role contestation is defined as a mismatch between the multiple roles held simultaneously by a state, for instance, Sweden's competing roles as a non-proliferation advocate and its status as a major arms exporter, in which case it gives rise to inter-role conflict. Role contestation also occurs due to the irreconcilable expectations held by the state or other states regarding a single role, as experienced by Denmark as a staunch ally of the

<sup>29</sup> Sebastian Harnisch, 'Role theory: operationalization of key concepts', in Harnisch et al., *Role theory in International Relations*, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo, eds, *Domestic role contestation, foreign policy, and International Relations* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); David McCourt, 'Domestic contestation over foreign policy, role-based and otherwise: three cautionary cases', *Politics* 41: 2, 2021, pp. 173–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395720945227>.

<sup>31</sup> McCourt, 'Domestic contestation over foreign policy, role-based and otherwise', p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo, 'Contested roles and domestic politics: reflections on role theory in foreign policy analysis and IR theory', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8: 1, 2012, pp. 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00156.x>; Juliet Kaarbo and Cristian Cantir, 'Role conflict in recent wars: Danish and Dutch debates over Iraq and Afghanistan', *Cooperation and Conflict* 48: 4, 2013, pp. 465–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836713482815>.

<sup>33</sup> Wehner and Thies, 'Role theory, narratives, and interpretation', p. 412.

<sup>34</sup> Klaus Brummer and Cameron G. Thies, 'The contested selection of national role conceptions', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 11: 3, 2015, pp. 273–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12045>.

<sup>35</sup> Marijke Breuning and Anna Pechenina, 'Role dissonance in foreign policy: Russia, power, and intercountry adoption', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16: 1, 2020, pp. 21–40, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orz004>; Kaarbo and Cantir, 'Role conflict in recent wars'; Thies, 'International socialization processes vs. Israeli national role conceptions'; Kai Opperman, Ryan K. Beasley and Juliet Kaarbo, 'British foreign policy after Brexit: losing Europe and finding a role', *International Relations* 34: 2, 2020, pp. 133–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117819864421>.

US in the context of the American decision to invade Iraq. Denmark's role as a dependable American ally sat uncomfortably with its self-conceptualization as an upholder of human rights and international law, giving rise to intra-role conflict.<sup>36</sup> Mismatched roles are often perceived by policy-makers as role stress, a situation characterized by external and/or internal pressure which renders existing roles inconsistent with the elite's assessments of the state's position in the international system and appropriate foreign policy conduct. How the ensuing process turns out depends on the domestic situation, as role adjustment may lead to domestic debates and friction with important trading partners, as seen, for instance, in New Zealand's launch of a 'Māori foreign policy'.<sup>37</sup> The public also holds views regarding the enactment of national roles and, while these views are seldom uniform or consistent, they are important signals of what constitutes an acceptable foreign policy orientation and conduct.<sup>38</sup> Importantly, role contestation may take place within the elite, in parliament among political parties or between economic and political elites, or between the elite and the public, often expressed through public manifestations and organized movements, giving rise to horizontal and vertical contestation respectively.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on Cantir and Kaarbo's depiction of horizontal and vertical contestation, we pull together these strains to develop a set of national scope conditions from which we derive four different action strategies for how role change can be managed in the domestic setting. To this end, we set up an analytical framework with two axes: a vertical axis which concerns vertical contestation of roles occurring when the national elite and public are at odds regarding the general foreign policy orientation—i.e. regarding the role conceptions proposed by the elite and the implications that follow; and a horizontal axis which depicts horizontal contestation involving conflict among the domestic elites over the state's foreign policy orientation and conduct.

## A framework for understanding role adaption and change: action strategies in a multilevel context

We now proceed to develop a dynamic model of domestic role adaptation and change by associating the sources of systemic role stress to multiple levels of state action. This model builds on social mechanisms developed by Coleman, Hedström and Swedberg and subsequent adaptations to foreign policy analysis by Thies as well as Michalski and Norman.<sup>40</sup> The model focuses on the transfor-

<sup>36</sup> Brummer and Thies, 'The contested selection of national role conceptions'.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Ross Smith and Bonnie Holster, 'New Zealand's "Māori foreign policy" and China: a case of instrumental relationality?', *International Affairs* 99: 4, 2023, pp. 1575–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaad123>.

<sup>38</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo, 'Contested roles and domestic politics'; Cristian Cantir and Juliet Kaarbo, eds, *Domestic role contestation, foreign policy and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Cantir and Kaarbo, 'Contested roles and domestic politics'.

<sup>40</sup> James Samuel Coleman, 'Social theory, social research, and a theory of action', *American Journal of Sociology* 91: 6, 1986, pp. 1309–35; Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg, 'Social mechanisms: An introductory essay', in Peter Hedström and Richard Swedberg, eds, *Social mechanisms: an analytical approach to social theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 1–31; Thies, *The United States, Israel, and the search for international order*, pp. 46–7; Anna Michalski and Ludvig Norman, 'Conceptualizing European security cooperation: competing international political orders and domestic factors', *European Journal of International*



mational pressure emanating from the international level on national elites who seek to formulate responses to these challenges by forging national action strategies on the domestic level. This process results in new, or adjusted, roles which when enacted on the international level are subject to acceptance by great powers, which, if successful, results in achieved roles.<sup>41</sup> Each step of the model represents a stage in the causal chain of role change for individual states creating a dynamic process based on reiterative interaction between states. Together, the three stages serve to demonstrate the interlinkage between the structure of the international social order and agency of the national elite. Because elite agency is crucial to our conceptualization of the small state dilemma, we focus on the second step, the action-formation mechanism, to understand the dynamic on the domestic level. As presented in the case-studies, it is at this level that the national elites undertake a process of domestic role adjustment, conditioned on national scope conditions, i.e. formal institutions, rules of decision-making, political culture, and expectations of the public and the wider elite. The action strategies which emerge can therefore be seen as a result of the interplay between the elite's view of desirable action and domestic constraints.

### *A contextual model of social mechanisms*

The contextual representation builds on three components. First, a *situational mechanism* which captures how a macro-level (systemic) transformation generates a distinct (new) situation for states in the international system. A shift in the international order may have a tremendous effect on individual states in the international system, resulting in realignment and instability until a new order is in place. In our case-studies, the situational mechanism is driven by the weakening of the rules-based international system and the deteriorating security situation in northern Europe, where the war in Ukraine constitutes a trigger for action and subsequently role change on the domestic level. The second component is an *action-formation mechanism* which operates on the micro level, i.e., the domestic setting. The changes taking place in the international social order engender pressure on individual national role conceptions, which in turn leads to role stress among political elites on the domestic level. Due to the increasing difficulty of conducting a coherent foreign policy, national political elites are compelled to reassess the state's international roles, generating a number of possible action strategies to deal with the stress occurring in both the constitutive and the action-oriented dimensions of these roles. How role contestation plays out in the domestic setting depends on the congruence of the elite and public perceptions of the material and immaterial resources of the state, national identity, beliefs and traditions as well as views on how conflicts should be handled through the formal foreign policy decision-making structures. As we will show, the domestic process of role changes in Finland and Sweden played out differently in each case, although the threat

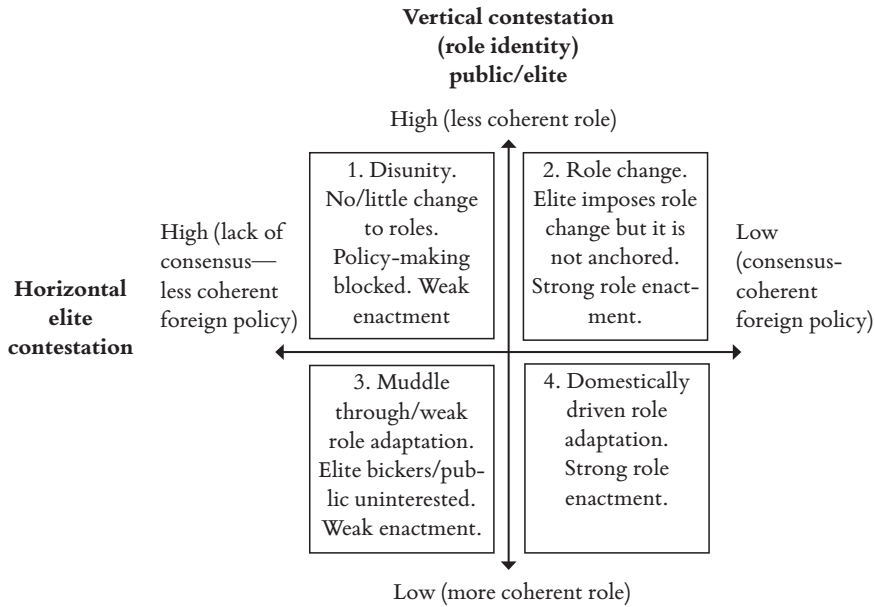
*Relations* 22: 4, 2016, pp. 749–72 at pp. 753–4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115602938>.

<sup>41</sup> Breuning and Pechenina, 'Role dissonance in foreign policy'.

from an increasingly aggressive Russia was perceived in similar ways. Finally, the third component is a *transformative mechanism* which drives the enactment of new or adjusted roles on the international level. It is in the interaction with other states that a new foreign policy role is achieved or rejected, leading to a modified position in the international order. In the cases of Finland and Sweden, the role-taking process played out differently on the international level. Finland's new role as a loyal NATO member was accepted by other states, and Finland joined the alliance after a swift accession process in April 2023 despite the obvious security challenge for NATO to add a further 1,340-km long border with Russia. Sweden's potential role as a member of NATO was, however, repeatedly challenged by Turkey and Hungary, with other NATO members presumably working to resolve the situation behind closed doors, but not publicly disowning the two members' concerns. Therefore, Sweden's new role as a NATO member is not yet achieved, and lingering doubts about its full loyalty persist.

As our primary focus is on the domestic level—the action formation mechanism—where the elites reassess roles and consider the action strategies available to them, we posit that the outcome of the reassessment is dependent on two main variables which specify scope conditions in terms of contestation in society at large and within the elite. *Vertical contestation* concerns the degree of congruence in the identity dimension of the views held by the public and the elite. A high level of contestation implies that there is a wide gap between the public and the elite concerning the state's social identity, which has a detrimental effect on the coherence of the state's international role. We expect intense public debates, mobilization of groups in society and public displays of discontent and opposition regarding the proposed reorientation of foreign policy. A low level of contestation implies that there is agreement among the public and the elite about the state's international role and foreign policy, and that the identity dimension of the role is coherent and the role conception strong. The agreement may be grounded on shallow engagement by the public or on the elite seeking, and succeeding, to keep the public at arm's length. It may also be an indication of an agreement among the elite and public largely on the state's international role and appropriate foreign policy conduct. *Horizontal contestation* concerns the degree of consensus among the elite on the state's appropriate international role. High horizontal contestation within the elite implies that there is a lack of consensus regarding the role that the state should play, which has a negative effect on foreign policy conduct and leads to a less coherent foreign policy. When there is a high level of conflict among the political elite, we expect that signs to this effect will emerge in the media and parliament. Role contestation may imply the existence of competition among national bureaucracies or political parties that hold different opinions on how the national interest is best achieved, or a mismatch among the views of political and bureaucratic elites concerning the state's foreign policy. Low contestation among the elite implies that there is broad consensus concerning the international role of the state which leads to strong role enactment and a coherent foreign policy.

**Figure 1: Four action strategies for role change in small liberal states**



*Four action strategies*

Based on the two main variables—vertical and horizontal contestation—the model produces scope conditions for four possible action strategies available to a small liberal state to reassess its international roles in a changing international order (see figure 1). These action strategies have a bearing on the formation of new roles and their enactment on the international level. Below follows a description of the scope conditions and the action strategies to which they give rise.

- 1) *Disunity preventing change.* High vertical and horizontal contestation blocks the reassessment of the existing roles to the effect that little adaptation or change is possible. Role enactment is weak or conflicting due to national strife regarding the content and conduct of national foreign policy.
- 2) *Elite-driven role change.* Congruence among the elite concerning the need to adjust the national foreign policy results in a partial role change. The change is not anchored with the public, which impedes role enactment in the long term.
- 3) *Muddle through/weak role adaptation.* High contestation among the elite leads to weak role adaptation, causing roles to become increasingly inadequate in view of external pressure. The intra-elite conflict leads to weak role enactment and inconsistent foreign policy conduct. The public supports existing roles and is not aware of the implications of, or is unmoved by, external challenges. This representation is unstable, and if the external pressure is sustained or increases it might result in a bottom-up movement in favour of an adjusted foreign policy.

4. *Domestically driven consensual role change.* Role adaptation is firmly anchored among the elite and supported by the public. The change in roles is driven by a strong role identity. Role enactment is strong, and the state's foreign policy conduct is coherent.

## Role change in Finland and Sweden

In the following section, we demonstrate our model of domestic action strategies and processes of role change by analysing the transformation of the foreign policies of Finland and Sweden.

### Finland

During the post-Cold War era, Finland's foreign policy role transformed from accommodating the will of the Soviet Union (USSR) to strongly identifying as a western democracy, with the ability to act as a communicator between East and West.

As a clear manifestation of the *rapprochement* with the West, Finland became a member of the EU in 1995, although still adhering to its policy of military non-alignment. The dominant international role of Finland soon became that of a devoted western state, situated at the core of the EU with a strong record of implementing EU policy.<sup>42</sup> Finland, unlike Sweden or Denmark, adopted the euro and adhered fully to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). These moves were endorsed by a large majority of the population and the political and economic elite, which, in President Sauli Niinistö's view, tilted the power balance among the Nordics, with Finland now playing a central role in the EU.<sup>43</sup>

However, living in the shadow of Russia remained an important dimension of Finland's social identity and continued to shape foreign policy choices. Finland therefore proceeded with caution on the European path. In contrast to Sweden, lingering threat perceptions from the East prompted Finland to keep its territorial defence in place, with general conscription and a significant reserve, to deter a possible future military attack.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Finland's foreign policy orientation was still characterized by the tension between a professed western identity, enacted by aligning closely with the core of the EU, and a perceived need to retain a functioning relationship with Russia. Balancing these opposing roles led Finland to pursue several forms of security cooperation with western states, primarily Sweden and the US, while remaining outside NATO, as such a decision would

<sup>42</sup> Saila Heinikoski, *Rule-bending debates in recent Finnish EU policy: pacta sunt servanda?*, FIIA Briefing Paper 300 (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2021); Brommesson et al., 'From variation to convergence in turbulent times'.

<sup>43</sup> Sauli Niinistö, 'Sommar' [Summer], Swedish Radio P1, 20 Aug. 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Finnish Government, *Finnish security and defence policy 2004: government report 6/2004, 18/2004* (Helsinki: Prime Minister's Office, 2004), [https://www.defmin.fi/files/311/2574\\_2160\\_English\\_White\\_paper\\_2004\\_1\\_.pdf](https://www.defmin.fi/files/311/2574_2160_English_White_paper_2004_1_.pdf); Finnish Government, *Finnish security and defence policy 2009, government report, 13/2009* (Helsinki: Prime Minister's Office, 2009), [https://vnk.fi/documents/10616/622958/J1309\\_Finnish+Security+and+Defence+Pol icy+2009.pdf](https://vnk.fi/documents/10616/622958/J1309_Finnish+Security+and+Defence+Policy+2009.pdf).

have amounted to a definite break in the working relationship with Russia.<sup>45</sup> Yet, Finland repeatedly expressed its sovereign right to choose its own path regarding the future of security and defence, including the option of NATO membership.<sup>46</sup> In its security and defence report for 2009, the Finnish government stated that there were strong arguments in favour of a future NATO membership, though such a move would require strong public support, indicating that the vertical unity between the elite and the public was not yet in place.<sup>47</sup>

Despite contemplating future membership of NATO, Finland kept the dialogue with Moscow open, even after the war in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, while deploring the negative impact of Russia's actions for the European security order.<sup>48</sup> To enact its role of communicator, Finland undertook to defuse great power competition in the high North by taking the initiative in 2021 to host a summit meeting of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Helsinki, to take place in 2025. This move clearly expressed Finland's support for multilateral institutions in line with the interest of small states in a hostile surrounding.<sup>49</sup> Although its role as communicator became increasingly tenuous, Finland was able to balance this role with its western role as a member of the EU by emphasizing common EU guidelines as the basis for its relationship with Russia.<sup>50</sup> Role strain could be avoided by Finland bolstering its role as a trusted communicator between East and West. When Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, Finland supported EU sanctions despite having to sacrifice elements of its sizeable trading relationship with Russia. By prioritizing its western role over its role as communicator, Finland demonstrated the importance attached to its role position as a core member of the EU and reconfirmed the dominant role conception of Finland as a western European state.

The balancing of Finland's western role with the role of a communicator came to an abrupt end with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. While Sweden was hesitant at first, Finland quickly moved towards NATO membership, signalling a break with the underlying social identity of the role of a communicator. Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine constituted a clear breach of the norms of the European security order and posed such tangible threats to Finland's own security that the role of a communicator became untenable. Already before the Russian full-scale invasion, President Niinistö made it clear in his New Year speech on 1 January 2022 that Finland would make its security policy choices independently, without regard to Russia's opinions, maintaining that 'Finland's room [for] manoeuvre and freedom of choice also include the possibility of military alignment and of applying for NATO membership, should we ourselves

<sup>45</sup> Brommesson et al, 'From variation to convergence in turbulent times'.

<sup>46</sup> Finnish Government, *Finnish security and defence policy 2004*.

<sup>47</sup> Finnish Government, *Finnish security and defence policy 2009*.

<sup>48</sup> Finnish Government, *Government report on Finnish foreign and security policy, 9/2016* (Helsinki: Prime Minister's Office, 2016), <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/documents/10616/1986338/VNKKJ092016+en.pdf>, pp. 13, 24.

<sup>49</sup> Matti Pesu and Henri Vanhanen, 'President Niinistö's two-track initiative: towards stronger Arctic dialogue and revitalization of the Helsinki Spirit?', FIIA Comment, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 14 April 2021, <https://www.fia.fi/en/publication/president-niinistos-two-track-initiative>.

<sup>50</sup> Pesu and Vanhanen, 'President Niinistö's two-track initiative'.

so decide. NATO's business is the so-called Open Door policy, the continuance of which has been repeatedly confirmed to Finland, also publicly.<sup>51</sup>

Soon after the invasion, on the morning of 24 February, President Niinistö decided to travel to Washington DC to meet with US President Joe Biden. The meeting took place on 4 March. During this meeting Finland was assured that, in the period leading up to NATO membership, the country would receive military support, although no formal defence guarantees were given. During the meeting, President Biden took the initiative to make a telephone call to the Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson. The two presidents called Andersson in order to keep the Swedes in the loop, as Sweden was not represented in Washington. It became increasingly clear that Finland was on a path to membership, while Sweden was still hesitating.<sup>52</sup>

During 2022, Finnish public opinion on NATO changed dramatically. Whereas before the war about 25 per cent of respondents in a poll conducted for Yle, the national Finnish public broadcaster, were in favour of membership, this rose to 53 per cent in favour at the start of the invasion and to 76 per cent in favour in May 2022.<sup>53</sup> The increasingly positive public opinion encouraged the political leadership on the path towards NATO membership and pushed them forward in the decision-making process. The process was therefore not exclusively elite-driven: rather, the elite and the public moved forward in tandem, with no obvious vertical contestation regarding the strengthening of the western role as a NATO member. On the domestic level, the role change was prepared by President Niinistö and Prime Minister Sanna Marin, who encouraged debate among political parties and launched a public enquiry into NATO membership in order to build national consensus.<sup>54</sup> By so doing, the horizontal unity was strengthened progressively. Full NATO membership, previously dismissed by Finland, which had sought alternatives to joining the military alliance, now stood out as desirable. Consequently, the policy of military non-alignment was abandoned. According to President Niinistö, the decision was reached in early March 2022, about two weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which is also when the more hesitant Swedish Prime Minister was informed of this decision by the Finnish president.<sup>55</sup> On the back of strong national unity, vertically and horizontally, Finland strengthened its role as a western European state through its application for NATO membership. The action

<sup>51</sup> President of the Republic of Finland, 'President of the Republic of Finland Sauli Niinistö's New Year's Speech on 1 January 2022', 1 Jan. 2022, <https://www.presidentti.fi/en/speeches/president-of-the-republic-of-finland-sauli-niinistos-new-years-speech-on-1-january-2022>.

<sup>52</sup> Niinistö, 'Summer'; The White House, 'Readout of President Biden's meeting with President of Finland Sauli Niinistö', 4 March 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/04/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-president-of-finland-sauli-niinisto>; Brommesson et al., 'From variation to convergence in turbulent times'.

<sup>53</sup> Finnish Government, *Government report on changes in the security environment* (Helsinki: Finnish Government, 2022), [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164002/VN\\_2022\\_20.pdf](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164002/VN_2022_20.pdf); Yle News, 'Yle poll: support for NATO membership soars to 76%', 9 May 2022, <https://yle.fi/a/3-12437506>.

<sup>54</sup> Finnish Government, *Government report on changes in the security environment*; Svenska Yle, 'Statsminister Marin hoppas på Natokonsensus mellan partierna i vår: "Betyder inte att alla måste vara av samma åsikt"' [Prime Minister Marin is hoping for the parties to reach a consensus on NATO this spring: "Doesn't mean everyone has to agree"], 9 March 2022, <https://svenska.yle.fi/a/7-10013962>.

<sup>55</sup> Niinistö, 'Summer'.

strategy behind Finland's profound foreign policy reorientation therefore falls in the category of domestically driven consensual role change. Although there might be some remaining nostalgia among parts of the foreign policy elite regarding the loss of the role as a communicator, Finland has pursued an unambiguous role enactment on the international level, as its new role, as NATO member, is already firmly anchored in the West. Contrary to its neighbour and co-applicant, Sweden, Finland has lived up to the expectations of other NATO members, and therefore the new role as NATO member should be considered as achieved.

## *Sweden*

Among the most prominent Swedish foreign policy roles are those of a non-aligned state and normative internationalist, combined into a master role, firmly anchored in the domestic political elite and enjoying strong public support.<sup>56</sup> These roles have traditionally been predicated on an autonomous foreign policy with a strong moralistic voice in international organizations, primarily the UN; a position of non-alignment *vis-à-vis* political and military alliances; substantial development aid; and a strong support for humanitarian causes, including human security, the global climate change agenda and sustainable development.

However, in recent decades, the country has seen a significant foreign policy reorientation prompted by the changing security situation in northern Europe, having a profound impact on its international roles and social identity. The process of transformation of the 200-year-old policy of neutrality began when Sweden became a member of the EU in 1995. This was accompanied by an elite-driven shift resulting in neutrality no longer being mentioned in official foreign policy declarations, which instead emphasized that Sweden's military non-alignment had a stabilizing effect on the security of northern Europe.<sup>57</sup> Although Sweden no longer professed to remain neutral in the event of an attack against a Nordic country or a member state of the EU,<sup>58</sup> the shift in the role of non-alignment was subtle enough not to stir too much public debate or contestation among the elite. In fact, the alignment with the EU's concept of solidarity and mutual assistance was part of efforts under the governments of Fredrik Reinfeldt (2006–2010 and 2010–2014) to move closer to the heart of the EU's CFSP. It did not receive much attention from either the public or the wider political elite since it was perceived as rather shallow, in part because membership of NATO would have been considered as a definite alignment with the western alliance and a rupture of the autonomous foreign policy. Because the policy shift remained mainly on the declaratory level,

<sup>56</sup> Douglas Brommesson, 'The Europeanization of Swedish foreign policy and beyond: on multiple roles in Swedish post-Cold-War foreign policy', in Jon Pierre, ed., *The Oxford handbook of Swedish politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 529–43; Brommesson et al., *Sweden's foreign and security policy in a time of flux*.

<sup>57</sup> See Sten Tolgfors, *Sveriges säkerhetspolitiska doktrin: från neutralitet på väg till Nato-alternativet* [Sweden's doctrine on security policy: from neutrality to the NATO option], Stockholm Free World Forum, 2021, <https://frivarld.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Sveriges-sa%CC%88kerhetspolitiska-doktrin.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> See, for instance, Carl Bildt, Minister for Foreign Affairs, *Statement of government policy in the parliamentary debate on foreign affairs, Wednesday, 19 February 2014* (Stockholm: Government Offices of Sweden, 2014), p. 9, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2014/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2014/>.

a possible contestation over intra-role conflict was contained, indicating little role change and weak role enactment. The social democratic-led first government of Stefan Löfvén (2014–2018) toned down the engagement with EU and NATO and instead emphasized the role of the UN, followed by the launch of a feminist foreign policy.<sup>59</sup> The government's emphasis on the UN as the main arena for global security and development was visible in the campaign for a seat as a non-permanent member on the UN Security Council in 2017–2018.<sup>60</sup> The feminist foreign policy, the emphasis on the UN and its global agenda for climate change and sustainable development, and the continuing high level of development aid, at 1 per cent of GDP, boosted Sweden's role as a normative internationalist and led to a strong role enactment of a more independent foreign policy, harking back to the Olof Palme doctrine of the 1970s. The Swedish government insisted on the return to a more traditional foreign policy stance, in line with deep-seated norms and the world-views of the Social Democratic Party, despite international criticism, for instance around the unilateral decision to recognize Palestine in 2014. Nevertheless, the renewed emphasis on an autonomous, internationalist foreign policy did not prevent the government from seeking closer cooperation with NATO, the US and other NATO members through a host country agreement with NATO in 2016.

During the second half of the 2010s, as security threats around the Baltic Sea became more apparent, the political elite was divided on how far its entanglement with NATO should go and how far the country's doctrine of non-alignment could be stretched. Drawing closer to NATO while maintaining the doctrine of non-alignment meant that the role as non-aligned suffered from weak enactment and intra-role conflict. Also, Sweden took an ambivalent stance *vis-à-vis* the EU's efforts to achieve strategic autonomy and strengthen its capabilities in security and defence.<sup>61</sup> The Swedish public was largely uninterested in the middle-through policy adopted by the government, and held on to the traditional view of Sweden as a militarily non-aligned country.

However, with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Swedish security establishment became increasingly concerned about the security situation. Because abandonment of the policy of non-alignment was still deemed inconceivable, the elite sought alternative ways to strengthen national security, primarily by fortifying national defences on the island of Gotland and establishing a web of agreements of bilateral military cooperation, most importantly with Finland and the US. Nonetheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 caught the Swedish elite completely off guard, partly because the strong attachment to non-alignment and normative internationalism had prevented a clear view of Russia's belligerent inten-

<sup>59</sup> Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond, 'Swedish feminist foreign policy in the making: ethics, politics, and gender', *Ethics & International Affairs* 30: 3, 2016, pp. 323–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679416000241>.

<sup>60</sup> Ann-Marie Ekengren, Fredrik D. Hjorthen and Ulrika Möller, 'A nonpermanent seat in the United Nations Security Council: why bother?', *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations* 26: 1, 2020, pp. 21–45, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02601007>.

<sup>61</sup> Elsa Hedling and Douglas Brommesson, 'Security through European integration or flexible autonomy: ambivalence in Sweden's position on the Eastern Partnership?', *Global Affairs* 3: 3, 2017, pp. 237–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2017.1416308>.



tions. The day before the invasion, Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde declared to parliament that membership of NATO was unthinkable, even in the light of increasing Russian hostility.<sup>62</sup> However, once war erupted, the pressure was on the Swedish elite to respond to the deteriorating security situation. In contrast to Finland, the Swedish government first sought a number of alternatives to membership of NATO, among which there was a strong preference for a bilateral defence agreement with Finland.<sup>63</sup> The attachment to its deep-seated role conception as a normative internationalist was still overriding, and the government hesitated to abandon the position as a militarily non-aligned state, which a membership of NATO would have entailed. Not before Finland decided to apply for membership—with or without Sweden—did the Swedish government realize that in the face of rising security threats and the lack of preparedness of its armed forces, NATO membership had become inevitable. The decision to apply for NATO membership was discussed swiftly in an informal process involving the political parties in parliament. An official report in April 2022, supported by five out of seven parties, concluded that only the collective defence guarantees of NATO could provide the security that Sweden needed in a radically worsened security situation in northern Europe.<sup>64</sup> The dissenting voices represented by the Green Party and the Left Party argued that joining NATO would worsen Sweden's vulnerability by provoking neighbouring countries and would reduce its freedom of action.

Sweden's decision to apply for membership, abandoning its role as a militarily non-aligned state, was premised on a fairly united political elite but accompanied by weak role enactment as a future NATO member. The role dissonance among the elite concerned the wisdom of abandoning the doctrine of non-alignment and a fear of losing autonomy in foreign policy as an alliance member. For these reasons, two political parties harboured strong reservations about Sweden becoming a member of NATO and at least another two, possibly three, saw membership as necessary for safety, but continued to hanker back to the role as a militarily non-aligned state with strong normative internationalist credentials. The public, although clearly in favour of membership at the time of the application in May 2022, remained bewildered by the swift abandonment of military non-alignment. Consequently, the horizontal and vertical unity regarding Sweden as a NATO member is not as strong as in Finland. The domestic action strategy is best characterized as muddle-through, since the volte-face on military defence was taken after all other options, including a bilateral defence pact with Finland, had been exhausted.<sup>65</sup> Even if a formal role change will occur once Sweden becomes a member of NATO, the underlying social identity will take much longer to change. Sweden's role enact-

<sup>62</sup> Government of Sweden, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, *Statement of foreign policy 2022* (Stockholm: Government Offices of Sweden, 2022), <https://www.government.se/speeches/2022/02/statement-of-foreign-policy-2022>.

<sup>63</sup> Brommesson et al., 'From variation to convergence in turbulent times'; Maggie Strömberg and Torbjörn Nilsson, 'Så gick det till när S vände om NATO' [How S turned around on NATO], *Svenska Dagbladet*, 2 July 2022, <https://www.svd.se/a/Qy1gXx/sa-gick-det-till-nar-magdalena-andersson-kovande-om-nato>.

<sup>64</sup> Government of Sweden, *Ett försämrat säkerhetspolitiskt läge—konsekvenser för Sverige* [A deteriorated security policy situation—consequences for Sweden], Ds 2022:7 (Stockholm: Government Offices of Sweden, 2022), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/departementsserien-och-promemorior/2022/05/ds-20227/>.

<sup>65</sup> Strömberg and Nilsson, 'Så gick det till när S vände om NATO'.

ment as a future NATO member was dealt a further blow by the refusal of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey to accord membership to Sweden unless a number of internal reforms to Sweden's handling of international terrorism were enacted. The concessions requested by Erdoğan were perceived as contrary to Sweden's traditional stance on human rights and international law, and the conservative-led government's efforts to fulfil these requirements was perceived as pandering to an autocrat, not least for the hasty reforms of the national anti-terror legislation.<sup>66</sup> In the eyes of much of the Swedish elites and public, this episode was perceived as humiliating and as proof of Sweden's loss of autonomous foreign policy, not befitting a normative internationalist.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have conceptualized the dilemma of small liberal states as pressure on traditional foreign policy roles by the weakening rules-based international system, forcing elites to address role strain through a domestic process of role adjustment and change. We have explicated this dilemma through a framework which highlights the dynamics between two levels of analysis (domestic and international) in order to fully capture the fluid environment of international politics and its impact on national foreign policy. Our ambition to conceptualize the consequences of a weakening rules-based order on small liberal states' international roles has three general implications. First, the position of small liberal states in the international system needs to be explained, in particular with regard to the way they balance vulnerability and the need for security against a quest for autonomy and enactment of foreign policy roles in line with their social identity. Second, the boundaries set by the state's social identity must be integrated in the conceptualization of domestic foreign policy-making and the choices that domestic elites perceive as possible given the international context. Third, the assumption of situated agency of domestic elites to steer the process of role change in the domestic setting and enact adjusted or new roles on the international scene ought to be made explicit. On these grounds, we focus on the domestic process to formulate four types of theoretically derived action strategies. They present possible outcomes of the domestic processes of role adjustment and change, depending on the interplay between factors of an ideational nature (identity, traditions and beliefs) and those which are politico-institutional in character (democratic procedures and popular opinion). The action strategy model allows us to conduct systematic, multifactorial analyses of the complex process of domestic role change which respect the boundaries set by both social identities and the domestic elite's appreciation of external pressure. We contend that the model is applicable to small and middle-sized liberal states which experience challenges, largely outside their control, to their foreign policy roles which

<sup>66</sup> Mats Knutsson, 'Nya terrorlagen bricka i spelet om Natomedlemskap' [New terror law pawn in the NATO membership game], SVT, 2 March 2023, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/nya-terrorlagen-bricka-i-spelet-om-nato-medlemskap>.

need to be met in the domestic setting. The predicament of these states could be elucidated in future case-studies.

Before discussing the empirical findings, it is appropriate to discuss the choice of role theory to elucidate the decision of Finland and Sweden to seek membership of NATO. We motivate this choice based on two considerations. First of these is the ability of role theory to conceptualize the link between foreign policy roles and a state's position in the international social order. We understand the rules-based international order in terms of an order that has provided small liberal states, such as Finland and Sweden, with stability through institutional and normative frameworks in line with their social identities, access to arenas such as the UN and the EU for the enactment of foreign policy roles, and, above all, a safe context in which normative-oriented foreign policy can be pursued. When such a social order is weakened and a power-based order takes over, small liberal states feel unsafe, as seen in the acute apprehension of vulnerability that followed Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the disbelief that the Russian political leadership was ready to break with longstanding international norms. Second, role theory conceptual tools lend themselves well to conceptualize the process of role adjustment and change in the domestic setting, as the elite undertakes to resolve the issue of role stress prompted by a weakening of international rules. We contribute with a model for domestic role change that allows for a multifactorial analysis which corresponds to the complexity of this process. The variety in national scope conditions allows for several possible outcomes in terms of role change, ranging from contested roles and role conflict to successfully adopted new and/or adjusted roles.

The conceptual model featured in this article allows for a wide variation in domestic level strategies elucidating situated elite agency, as illustrated in the case of role change in Finland and Sweden. In Finland, the public and the political elite supported the orientation away from its role as a communicator between East and West and its deep economic ties with Russia. By seeking membership of NATO, Finland underwent a substantial role transition supported by the public and the political elite. Its domestic action strategy is characterized by strong role adaptation and role enactment. In Sweden, the decision to seek membership of NATO was taken by elites driven by a perceived necessity to seek safety but in contradiction with national role conceptions, breaking with traditional social identities. Sweden has also undergone a significant role change—one which is surrounded by ambivalence and nostalgia for old roles, possibly resulting in less coherent role enactment. Its domestic action strategy is characterized by muddling through and, hitherto, fairly weak role enactment. As the adjustment to NATO membership is internalized in Finland, and possibly also in Sweden, new foreign policy roles will emerge. The new role as NATO member is already having a strong effect on other foreign policy roles, which are adjusting, producing new role sets for both countries and consolidating the radical reorientation of their foreign and security policies.