



# From Soft Power to Hard Power: Finland's Security Strategy vis-à-vis Russia (1992-2022)

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This paper analyzes the strategies that small states exert to offset power imbalances with neighboring powers. Building on Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, the article examines the changes in Finland's security strategy since the end of the Cold War. It focuses on its use of soft and hard power means to deal with Russia, specifically in three periods: 1992-2013, 2014-2022, and since 2022. Given the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the undermined security situation worldwide, the article sheds light on potential paths of action for small states struggling against powerful rivals, and on the significance of soft power tools in those states' security strategies as a means to compensate for their relative inferiority in size.

*Keywords:* small states, Finland, Russia, soft power, hard power, security strategy

## Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 substantially undermined the security situation extant in Europe since the Second World War. With the ongoing potential for escalation between Russia and the West, developments force states to calculate new routes in a changing reality. Finland, which is perceived as a peaceful and secure state, is in the eye of the storm, and seeks to abandon its traditional policy of military neutrality and join NATO.

History teaches that weak states cannot take their survival for granted. For example, Athens decreed that Melos should be wiped out, despite the island's efforts to stay out of the Peloponnesian War. Other small states such as Estonia, Czechoslovakia, and Kuwait suffered at the hands of large, threatening neighbors, sometimes to the point of loss of territory or

independence or even destruction. And while small states such as Israel, Singapore, and Taiwan have strong armies, they continue to suffer from threats to their security.

An examination of Finland's foreign and security policy, as well as its recent history, shows that since its independence Finland has walked a tightrope in order to avoid rousing the Russian Bear from its sleep. Finland, which against all odds survived struggles among great

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powers over the last century, was freed from the threat that had hovered over it once the Soviet Union disintegrated. Nonetheless, its leaders, who chose a cautious policy both during and after the Cold War, still treated Russia as a challenge, even during the years when Moscow was relatively weak.

The work shows how a small state such as Finland used a changing strategy after the Cold War toward a neighboring power in order to reduce the likelihood of potential confrontation. It contends that after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and in a changing international atmosphere, Helsinki, with the help of soft power tools and diplomatic activism, sought to position itself as a positive and influential force in the European Union and bring the EU closer to Russia. The Finns and many in the EU hoped that the relative integration of Russia in the West would moderate its conduct, and perhaps even generate liberalization of its society and regime. The declining security situation in Europe in light of increased Russian assertiveness, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and the war in Ukraine led to a deterioration in relations between Russia and the EU, which accordingly led to a change in Finnish doctrine. Alongside enhancing its military strength and fortifying its relations with friendly states, Helsinki gradually abandoned its use of soft power means and instead took diplomatic, financial, and other moves to restrain the aggressive conduct of its neighbor. In 2022, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Finland's perception of this threat became more serious, and it took another step toward increased reliance on hard power components in its security doctrine: it began arms acquisitions and applied to join NATO.

Using Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, the paper will examine changes in Finland's foreign and security policies after the Cold War, during three periods: 1992-2013, 2014-2022, and since 2022. After a brief review of the theoretical basis, the paper will describe Finland's threat perceptions and the neutral strategy that it employed during the Cold War. These serve as

an introduction to the central section, which analyzes how developments in the international environment and Russia's conduct in the years following the Cold War prompted changes in Finland's foreign and security doctrine and changed its orientation from one favoring soft power means to hard power means.

### **Small States and Soft Power**

International relations literature describes how small states employ a variety of strategies with the aim of enlarging their security margins in struggles against powerful rivals. Thus, for example, during World War II Finland used the bandwagon strategy and allied with Nazi Germany, after it was defeated by the Soviet Union (Walt, 1987, pp. 24, 30). Small or weak states such as Ireland, Switzerland, and Spain remained neutral just before, during, or after World War II in order to avoid military confrontation (Neumann & Gstöhl, 2006, p. 10). Iceland was considered a client under the American military, political, and economic umbrella from the Cold War period through the 2000s (Thorhallsson et al., 2018, pp. 541, 557). The Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—rely on NATO's collective defense pact for defense from an aggressor (Vaicekauskaitė, 2017, p. 14). The Benelux states were the founders of the integration project, the European Coal and Steel Community of 1951, and the European Economic Community of 1957. At the same time, some Scandinavians states such as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark demonstrated a cool attitude toward integration and maximized their autonomy (Steinmetz & Wivel, 2016, pp. 24–25). Singapore and Israel chose military buildup as a response to their neighbors' threats (Matthias, 2017, pp. 4, 186), and North Korea took advantage of the competition between China and the Soviet Union to extract material benefits from both (Bolton, 2021, p. 275).

Joseph Nye, who coined the term "soft power," used it in the context of great powers and large states (Nye, 1990, pp. 166-167, 2004,

pp. 5-6; 2011, p. 4), but in the last two decades the term has been used in relation to additional actors in global politics, including small states (Nye, 2004, p. 10). Small states differ materially from great powers, but they have the ability to influence the international arena in a way disproportionate to their size by using soft power means (McClory, 2019, pp. 20-21; Nye, 2019).

Despite the rich literature on both soft power and small state strategies, there is relatively little discussion of small states' use of soft power as part of their security doctrines. Therein lies the aim of the present paper—to present in a new light the role of soft power as a complementary means to military strength in small state strategies.

The element of perception of intentions in Walt's balance of threat theory assists here in analyzing changes in Finland's security doctrine in light of the Russian challenge and changes in the international environment after the Cold War ended. The theory shows how threat perceptions and behaviors of states in the international system are influenced by external threats. More specifically, the perception of a threat and its severity are determined in accordance with the geographic distance between a state and its rival state, the military capabilities that the rival state possesses and whether the rival state is advancing a major military buildup of offensive capabilities, and if it is demonstrating aggressive or defensive intentions (Walt, 1987, pp. 21-41).<sup>1</sup>

Thus, when a rival state adopts a cautious strategy, is unwilling to use military force, and seeks diplomatic solutions to disputes, the small state's threat perception will be less severe. Under these circumstances, the small state will perceive the regional or international environment as relatively safe. Identifying that its room for maneuver has increased will spur the small state to adopt an ambitious diplomatic strategy that includes extensive use of soft power measures to strengthen its overall security and attract rival actors to cooperate in friendly ways.

In tandem, the small state will try to encourage its rivals to adopt international norms, rules, and laws, join institutions, and embed democratic values and patterns and a market economy in its rival's society and regime to advance mutual dependence. In other words, the small state will ascribe a central role to soft power in its security strategy and rely less on military strength, and will try in this manner to moderate the aggressiveness of its neighbor peacefully (Keohane & Nye, 1977; Miller, 2010, pp. 575–576; Neumann & Gstöhl, 2006, p. 20; Nye, 2002; Rosecrance, 1986; Russell, 2020). Sometimes a small state will use soft power to position itself as a leading actor in international organizations and institutions, form small state coalitions in order to leverage their collective influence, and widen their room for maneuver (Chong, 2010, p. 401; Nye, 2009; Pape, 2005, pp. 17, 36; Rickli, 2008). Against the backdrop of the balance of threat theory, Helsinki sought to reduce the danger it faced from its neighbor by bringing Moscow closer to the European Union through soft power, at a time when the environment changed at the end of the Cold War and Moscow was relatively weak.

On the other hand, when a great power is equipping its military, especially when it uses belligerent means to harm the sovereignty of an ally or neighbor or takes unilateral steps that violate international norms and law, these measures signal its aggressive intentions. In accordance with the perception of intentions component of the balance of threat theory, the small state will realize under these conditions that it has reduced room to maneuver. Its threat perception will thus become more severe. Alongside cultivating its military strength, it will pursue a policy of assertive diplomacy, which includes imposing legal, institutional, and normative restrictions on the threatening power with the aim of reducing the latter's overall superiority, harming its international legitimacy, and restraining it (Miller, 2010, p. 566; Nye, 2002; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2018). Accordingly, Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the

declining security situation on the European continent prompted a change in Finland's doctrine, leading it to use diplomatic and financial tools as part of overall EU policy aimed at restraining the aggression of its neighbor. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Finnish threat perception became even more severe, and its security doctrine began to rely on explicit hard power means, primarily acquisition of F-35 jets and an application to NATO.

### **Finnish Threat Perception**

Finland lies in northern Europe, between the Baltic Sea, the Gulf of Bothnia, and the Gulf of Finland, and between Sweden and Russia. It is the 66<sup>th</sup> largest country in the world in physical size (338,145 sq km) but as of December 2022 is home to only 5.6 million residents. It was a duchy within the Kingdom of Sweden during the 12<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries and an autonomous entity under the Russian Empire from 1809. Finland gained independence in 1917 (*World Factbook*, 2022).

Since then, Finland has maintained close relations with Western states, while attempting to keep tensions low with its Russian neighbor (Weinger, 2018). During World War II Finland refused to surrender to the Soviets, who attacked them in November 1939 during what became known as the Winter War. Despite heavy losses suffered by the Red Army, the Finns were exhausted after three months of fighting and lacked ammunition, manpower, and support to continue fighting, and the war ended with an agreement in 1940 (Forss, 2009, p. 2). This situation continued until Finland's alliance with Nazi Germany during the Continuation War (1941-1944), designed in part to regain the territory it had lost (Sander, 2022; Walt, 1987, pp. 24, 30).

Daily life in Finland is still influenced significantly by its neighbor Russia, which has a much larger population, area, and economy, greater natural resources, and more military power. The two share a 1,300 km border, and Finland's geographic position at the periphery of

the European continent isolates it from its allies and binds it to Russia. Russia's renewed drive to attain the status of a world power compels Finland to choose its policy accordingly (Nyberg, 2015; Vinayaraj, 2011, pp. 258-262). All of these factors, along with Finland's dependence on maritime routes for receiving aid, make it vulnerable in times of crisis (Ministry of Defence, 2016, p. 5).

### **Neutrality in a Limited Maneuver Space (1945-1991)**

American diplomat George Kennan said that in Russia's neighborhood, there are only enemies or vassals. Finland is different in this respect, as it maintained a close relationship with Russia via neutral strategy, in order to maintain its independence (Stoicesco et al., 2021, p. 32). The Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance (FCMA)<sup>2</sup> signed in 1948 between the two sides, in the wake of Soviet pressure, regulated their relations until 1992 (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022). The Treaty compelled Finnish leaders Juho Paasikivi and Urho Kekkonen to walk a tightrope and maintain close diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in order to earn its trust, while giving up on a certain degree of independence (Diamond, 2021, pp. 83-85). The agreement prevented Helsinki from joining the Marshall Plan, but allowed it limited economic relations with the West. It became a member of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in early 1948, joined the UN in 1955, and after a lengthy process joined the OECD in 1969 and initiated the establishment of the CSCE<sup>3</sup> in Europe in 1975 (Carroll, 2019; Liikanen, 2014; Ray, n.d.).

At the same time, under the leadership of Kekkonen (1956-1981), the first signs appeared of Finland positioning itself as a peaceful state that mediated between the rival blocs. Kekkonen, who sought to turn Finland's small size and its neutrality into an advantage, pursued a more activist policy than his predecessor (Browning, 2006, pp. 677-679). His successor, Mauno Koivisto (1982-1994), continued Kekkonen's

policy, and at the end of the Cold War Finland served as a cautious intermediary between East and West (Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi, 2016, p. 69). Finland's success in maintaining its independence constituted a model for Soviet and Western leaders of great power conduct and good neighborly relations toward a small, prosperous neighboring state, which survived against all odds (Forsberg & Pesu, 2016, pp. 484, 487-488).

### Neutrality Out, Pro-European Activism In (1992-2013)

Russia's military, political, and economic weakness in the 1990s (Anderson et al., 2000, pp. 250-253; Goldgeier & McFaul, 2003, p. 204) compelled it to conduct itself with relative moderation and to cooperate with the United States in a number of fields and initiatives, such as Operation Desert Storm, arms control treaties, including START II, and mechanisms to prevent the proliferation of ballistic missiles (United States House of Representatives, 2000, p. 8). According to the perception of intentions component in the balance of threat theory, the reduction in tensions and Moscow's willingness to resolve disputes through diplomatic means created new opportunities for Finland to exert its influence (Vinayaraj, 2011, pp. 273-274). In practice, Finland ceased to be caught between competing Eastern and Western blocs, and its liberation from Moscow's grasp allowed it to return to its historic, political, and cultural origins (Browning, 2002, pp. 47-48; Jokela, 2011, p. 61), and it joined the EU in 1995 (Blank, 1996, p. 3).

In accordance with the balance of threat theory, Russia's relatively moderate conduct until the mid-2000s led Finland to the assessment that its neighbor presented a challenge rather than a threat. At the same time, Finland dealt with secondary security threats such as terror organizations, criminals, and immigrants who threatened to enter its territory from Russia in the wake of the eastward expansion of EU borders and its commitment as a member of the Schengen Convention (Raudaskoski &

Laine, 2018, pp. 13-14; United States House of Representatives, 2000, p. 8). And yet due to Finland's geographic proximity to Russia, the Finns understood that they would need to cultivate friendly relations with Russia, no matter how weak it was (Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi, 2016, pp. 70-71). Indeed, according to Koivisto and his contemporaries, "the Russian thinking" continued to rely on expansion and the greatness of the Russian state and empire (Sutela, 2001, p. 6).

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The Finns also rejected the "end of history" thesis and maintained a regular army even after the Cold War, with a mandatory draft law in place (Kunz, 2018, p. 16). At the same time, geopolitical changes and the reduced tension caused by Russia's moderated conduct allowed Finland to reduce its military expenditure as a percentage of GDP, from 1.9 percent in 1992 to 1.1 percent in 2001 (World Bank, n.d.). This reduction occurred in parallel with the changed orientation of Finnish doctrine after the Cold War, manifested in explicit reliance on diplomatic strength and soft power means.

Finland initially joined NATO's North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) as an observer;<sup>4</sup> the Council served as a platform for boosting alliances with former Iron Curtain states and others. Most Finnish leaders emphasized that they followed the European diplomatic but not the military line, although they always retained the right to join NATO at any time (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022). They perceived the expansion of NATO as harmful to stability and to reforms Russia was advancing, and as a move that could cause a future confrontation with Moscow. Thus from the early 1990s, Finland maintained a neutral policy (Aunesluoma & Rainio-Niemi,



2016, p. 69; Blank, 1996, pp. 4, 18) and relied mainly on its membership in the EU, which it saw as its “soft security provider” (Brady & Thorhallsson, 2021, p. 125).

The relief Finland experienced as a result of its membership in the European Union and changed Russian conduct boosted a diplomatic effort begun in the 1990s aimed at casting off its image as a small, weak state, participating in setting international agendas and decision making, and maximizing its global influence (Haukkala, 2010). Thus, in parallel to its commitment to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP),<sup>5</sup> membership in the EU encouraged Finland to promote a new agenda and express diplomatic involvement via the use of soft power (Sutela, 2001, p. 11). The Finns also sought to strengthen the EU’s institutional structure and power (Blank, 1996, p. 8; Haukkala, 2010). Thus, for example, Finland worked in the 1990s to strengthen the independent status of the European Commission in order to balance the power of the Council of Ministers, and thereby strengthened the status of the small states (Store, 2015). Over time, the Finns increased their political influence in EU institutions; these actions strengthened their diplomatic power, which constituted the basis for maintaining Finland’s stability and security, as well as that of its neighbors and the entire continent (Tiilikainen, n.d., pp. 58-59).

The new diplomatic space that opened for Finland in light of the reduced threat it faced allowed it to advance its broad interests on the Continent via diplomatic initiative. Yet while Finland did not establish an independent policy toward Russia, it was able to advance a new agenda toward its neighbor (Sutela, 2001, pp. 8, 11), at a time in the 2000s that the EU struggled to agree on a unified policy toward Russia (Stent, p. 156, 2007).

Martti Ahtisaari, who served as President of Finland from 1994-2000, was one of the pioneers promoting deepening cooperation between the EU and Russia, out of the expectation that creating mutual dependence would reduce

the likelihood of conflict between the parties. Thanks to its geographic location and its closeness with Russia and via its diplomatic involvement, Finland hoped to convey to the world and to Europe that a small state, a new EU member, could leave a mark on the EU’s overall policy (Pesu et al., 2020, p. 12; Sutela, 2001, p. 11). The Finns sought to convey to Moscow that conflict with its neighbor to the West would mean conflict with the entire European Union, but without bringing in elements that would damage their ties with Russia. At the same time, the diplomatic status Finland achieved in the EU and its close relations with Russia allowed it to use soft power not only vis-à-vis the European Union but also vis-à-vis its neighbor, sending a calming message that its enemies were not scrambling toward its borders (Blank, 1996, p. 8; Osiewicz, 2005, p. 147).

This Finnish policy went hand in hand with the rise of the liberal order and the step away from politics of power in Europe, which encouraged Western states to expect that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s political culture would develop and begin to implement basic norms of liberal democracy, the rule of law, and a free economy (Heikka, 2004, pp. 2-3). In the EU there were even those who believed that they had the power to encourage domestic political change in Russia (Pesu et al., 2020, p. 12). Thus, in spite of the removal of the subjects of democracy and human rights from the agenda, the sides began a strategic partnership (Haukkala, 2000, pp. 5-6).<sup>6</sup>

Finland sought, via soft power means and diplomatic initiative, to integrate Russia in the European community in order to reduce tension with its neighbor, and particularly to build relations of trust between the sides. Mediating actions included attempts by Finland to connect Russia via a multilateral network of ties to the European Council, the OSCE, and additional international and European organizations (Haukkala, 2010; Pesu et al., 2020, pp. 12, 30). Helsinki’s flagship project was the Northern Dimension Initiative (NDI), which was

launched in order to promote and develop the ties between Finland and its neighbors with Russia, and was officially recognized and adopted by the European Union (Sutela, 2001, p. 9). The program aimed to maintain stability in northern Europe and develop a network of functional collaborations with Moscow (Pesu et al., 2020, pp. 12-14).

The Initiative included elements of cooperation in the fields of information and communications technology with Baltic states and private companies, and instituting e-commerce in Russia. Finland also set a target of promoting an information society in the Baltic region, setting up internet connections in schools, and building a mass communication network in the Barents region. Subsequent additions to the program included a partnership for environmental protection called the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership—an initiative aimed at advancing projects for treatment of radioactive waste in northwest Russia. In the early 2000s Finnish Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen supported a project of upgrading the rail line between Helsinki and Saint Petersburg, which sought to reduce travel time between the cities (Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, 2001a). The NDI was also essential for handling disputes over the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, which until then had received little attention from decision makers in Brussels (Huisman, 2002, p. 6).

In other words, the NDI assisted in structuring integration and a new reality that replaced the old dispute between East and West. By applying soft power within the European Union, Finland changed its peripheral image and became an influential regional actor. No less importantly, it managed to prevent quarrels between West European states and Russia on drawing the border between them, and raised the profile of the northern region, which gained the status of an innovative center shaping a new European identity and building partnerships, and a sense of community with Russia in a variety of fields

(Browning, 2006, p. 681; Saari & Lavikainen, 2022, p. 3).

In the 1990s, Finnish President Ahtisaari proposed launching a regular dialogue of the US, the EU, and Russia, in order to advance Russia's integration into the multilateral European trade system. Finland also used soft power tools to draw Russia closer to the Western community through the Barents Sea initiative, and by adding it to the Council of the Baltic Sea States and the Arctic Council. In 1996, the European Council accepted Russia as a member—a decision supported by Finland (Blank, 1996, p. 18; Saari & Lavikainen, 2022, p. 3).

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Another way in which Finland served as a bridge between Moscow and the West and used soft power vis-à-vis its neighbor was its advocacy for the Gulf of Finland Growth Triangle program, which was recognized by the EU as a growth area of mutual economic interdependence between Finland, Russia, and the Baltic states. The program aimed to offer solutions to challenges and obstacles that arose toward cooperation among regional states, which varied in their degrees of development, and allowed them to enhance their comparative advantages, promote strategic cooperation, and facilitate trade (Dickinson, 2003, pp. 59-60). Finland's leaders also promoted low-level military cooperation in order to strengthen the Baltic states after they declared their renewed independence, and to cultivate trusting relations between them and Russia, while softening the sensitive issue of minorities and security via OSCE mediation (Blank, 1996, p. 19). Relative success encouraged Russia and Finland to sign a cooperation agreement on humanitarian issues of lifesaving and accident prevention at

sea and in the air in the Baltic region, and in the two states' border regions and their airspace (Pimiä, 2014, p. 22).

Due to the challenges of maintaining secure border crossings, Finland launched the Neighboring Area Co-operation Programme, which aimed at deepening bilateral and informal ties between the states (Vinayaraj, 2011, p. 274). Initiatives in this spirit included Finnish-Russian cooperation in and around border regions between the two states, and promoted ties between civil societies in the two countries by blurring the physical border, without diminishing security arrangements. Finland's focus on specific areas of expertise allowed it to allocate resources in an efficient and focused manner. Different sectors and layers of Finnish society likewise participated in the initiative alongside government ministries, communities and towns, schools, and clubs, which created personal relationships on both sides of the border and with colleagues from Moscow (Sutela, 2001, p. 20).

Through this use of soft power toward Russia the Finns sought to advance the capabilities and motivations of the Russian border guard to implement security arrangements. Furthermore, the border arrangements served as a model for how the EU and the Schengen Convention should be implemented. Likewise, by simplifying the system for granting entry visas, the Russians and Finns regulated entry and exit of visitors in and out of their countries (Sutela, p. 22). Regulating this issue encouraged Finnish President Tarja Halonen (2000-2008) to support the Russian proposal to promote a visa-free regime with EU states, and she was asked by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to advance this idea in Brussels (AP, 2010; Tarja Halonen profile, n.d.).

Finland and Russia also cooperated in forestry, and from the early 2000s held a Russian-Finnish summit every few years<sup>7</sup> with large numbers of participants. Issues addressed included sustainable forestry, promotion of tech investments in bio-economy and innovative

ecological construction (Ministry of Agriculture, 2012; Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, 2012; Prime Minister Paavo Lipponen, 2001b).

Even the Second Chechen War (1999-2000) did not undermine the liberal worldview that guided Finnish decision makers. Perhaps they perceived the war as a marginal geopolitical event during a global war on terror; it did not fundamentally change the threat perception in Finland, which held the EU presidency in 1999 and 2006. It came down on the side of using soft power tools on Russia and the EU, in order to bind them together (Heikka, 2004, pp. 2-3; Pesu et al., 2020, pp. 12-14). The Finns put their intention to develop ties with Russia at the center of the EU agenda, with the aim of reaching a free trade agreement with them and perhaps even leading them to full EU membership (Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen, 2006). In 2004 Russian Ambassador to Finland Vladimir Grinin declared that the ties between the countries set an example for other states in the EU: "We view Finland as a valuable partner in developing our overall relations with the EU. The Finns are undoubtedly the EU's experts on Russia. Finland's experience of good-neighbour cooperation despite all the difficult stages and hardships of our not so far away past, can offer many positive guidelines for new EU members" (Smith, 2014, p. 102).

The Georgia-Russia war reflected a worsening of the security situation on the Continent, and Russia's conduct marked a turning point away from the liberal order. But there was no essential change in Finland's threat perception, as described by the balance of threat theory: Russian aggression did not halt Finnish efforts to bring the EU closer to Moscow, whether in order to preserve Russia's trust and willingness to converse after the war, or due to the war's limited scope.

Finland, which served as the chair of the OSCE, initially sought to use diplomatic tools to reach a compromise in the crisis (Pesu et al., 2020, pp. 12-14). Finnish Ministers for Foreign Affairs Ilkka Kanerva and Alexander Stubb maintained that there was no alternative to



dialogue and cooperation with Russia. In their eyes, only through active Finnish involvement in the EU was it possible to restrain Russian aggression (Siddi, 2017, pp. 110-112). This perception was accompanied by efforts at dialogue that proved to be successful and demonstrated the importance of Finland's unique status and position. Because Finland was not perceived as anti-Russian in the talks, it assisted in mediating a ceasefire between the sides through shuttle diplomacy conducted together with France, which held the rotating EU presidency (Whitman & Wolff, 2010, p. 92).

It became clear that the relations of trust between the sides had been maintained, and after the war Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asked for assistance based on Finland's experience and standing to establish a new security arrangement in Europe, which would take into account the question of NATO expansion and the CFE treaty for the prevention of nonconventional weapons and antimissile air defense proliferation (Forss, 2009, p. 5). Senior Finnish leaders, including Stubb and Halonen, agreed to take on the role of mediators and publicly promote the OSCE reform in European security architecture, corresponding with the needs of the parties (Siddi, 2017, p. 114).

The Finns continued to take a diplomatic stance of support for their neighbor's inclusion in the global-economic system even during demonstrations that broke out in Russia in December 2011, and during manipulations by the authorities in the elections there. Senior Finnish politicians including Minister for Foreign Affairs Erkki Tuomioja and President Tarja Halonen, during their visit to Moscow in 2012, refrained from involvement in events that they saw as internal Russian affairs. This stance was also maintained after Sauli Niinistö became President that year (Siddi, 2017, pp. 132-134).

## **Restraint through Diplomatic Measures (2014-2022)**

Until 2007-2008 Russia recorded economic growth while promoting military

modernization—steps that encouraged it to seek aggressive ways to return to the status of a world power (Åslund, 2020; Bowen & Welt, 2021, pp. 25-26; Mearsheimer, 2014, pp. 82-83). Above all, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and the conflict in eastern Ukraine marked an explicit change in Moscow's conduct since the end of the Cold War. They caused a gradual return to the politics of power and neo-realist logic, and a worsening in the EU's and Finland's threat perception, as framed in the balance of threat theory (Henriksson, 2018; Järvenpää, 2015, p. 2).

Russia's change of direction toward aggressive conduct, which sought to challenge the existing order and undermine the balance of power, caused a collapse in the strategic partnership between Brussels and Moscow, and led the EU to abandon the aspiration to generate liberalization in the latter's regime and society. The core principles of the new policy laid out by EU foreign ministers in 2016 reflected this change: the EU demanded the implementation of the Minsk agreements prior to the removal of sanctions on Russia. It decided to strengthen ties with the former Soviet republics in eastern Europe and central Asia, develop resilience against hybrid threats and threats on the energy sector, and conduct selective ties with Russia, while supporting civil society and the Russian people above the regime's head. In other words, the core of the EU's policy was to use diplomatic tools to narrow Russia's range of options and perhaps deter it from continuing its actions in Ukraine (Pesu et al., 2020, pp. 14-16).

In comparison to the relatively minor steps the EU took in response to the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, the response to the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula was comprehensive. Initial sanctions were imposed at the time of the Russian takeover in March 2014. At first, these focused on freezing assets and revoking visas of members of the Russian elite, Ukrainian separatists, and organizations affiliated with them. In June and September 2014, the EU imposed limitations on trade

with Crimea, and a month later, after Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 was shot down, sanctions were imposed in the military, economic, and energy sectors (Russell, 2022, p. 1).

While Finland did not actually change its core policy on not joining NATO as a full member and retained its status as a NATO partner (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022),<sup>8</sup> the aggravated threat level caused by Russian conduct challenged Finland's traditional stance, which attempted to avoid taking sides in great power conflicts (Järvenpää, 2015, pp. 2-3). Accordingly, the soft power component of Finnish doctrine diminished, and Finland gradually moved toward reliance on hard power means, including strengthening self-defense capabilities, tightening security ties with the US and the Nordic states, and attempting to promote security policy in the EU, alongside expanding cooperation with NATO (Pesu, 2017, p. 5).

At the same time, the Finnish government took an unusually explicit stance toward Moscow in the diplomatic arena from the onset of the crisis. This stance expressed a strategic change in the wake of the heightened threat level. Backed by local public opinion, Helsinki harshly condemned aggressive Russian actions and emphasized that these were unacceptable, violated the UN Charter and international law, and harmed Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Since then, Finland has moved toward use of restraining diplomatic means in its doctrine, via influence on EU decision making processes in adopting and carrying out steps that place limits on Russia (Henriksson, 2018). The President of Finland made an unprecedented declaration that his country would conduct its relations with Russia as a member of the EU. The Finns emphasized that they were not seeking to mediate between the sides but supported the restrictions led by the European Council and the EU Council (Pesu et al., 2020, pp. 14-16). Finnish support for the EU stance resulted from a fear that Finland would be forced to choose a side, Russia or the West, leading Finnish decision

makers to work to maintain the unity of the EU as far as possible (Joly & Haesebrouck, 2021, p. 118).

Diplomatic measures Finland implemented as part of the European policy of applying pressure also included support for the suspension of bilateral summits between the EU and Russia, and reductions in ministerial meetings, other than meetings between representatives of Defense Ministries, which ceased entirely. After the nerve gas attack in Salisbury (2018), Finland, in consultation with its close friends Germany and Sweden, expelled a Russian intelligence officer from its territory (Pesu et al., 2020, p. 16). Finland was not afraid to support EU policy and publicly criticize Moscow after the arrest of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the humiliation of EU Foreign Minister Josep Borrell during his visit to Moscow, and the expulsion of European diplomats in February 2021 (Stoicescu et al., 2021, p. 33).

The crisis in Ukraine also had implications for collaborations and stability in the Arctic. Some of the ties between states and Russia were maintained, such as in lifesaving, but the security dialogue between the US, Canada, Russia, Finland, and others was suspended and military cooperation in the region were stopped, as acts of punishment. Thus, for example, no Russian force was allowed to participate in the round of security dialogue among Arctic security forces in 2014-2015 (Byers, 2017, pp. 385-387; Klimenko, 2016, pp. v-vi).

Furthermore, from the outbreak of the crisis until December 2020, Finland sent Ukraine aid worth over \$56 million (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2021, pp. 8-10). The aid focused on development, civilian crisis management, humanitarian aid, minesweeping aid, and support for nongovernmental organizations and trusts. In 2016 Finland renewed its cooperation with Ukraine on educational affairs and energy efficiency. It also promoted a reform, through a Council of Europe action plan, regarding the rule of law and the justice system, human rights, governance, and the defense of minorities and

refugees. Furthermore, Finland takes part in planning joint European policy and financial assistance in the EU and the OSCE. EU support is coordinated by the Support Group for Ukraine, and a team head from Finland is responsible for the fields of science, education, and social affairs. Finland is still involved in dialogue in the UN lead by the Nordic state group, and is a partner in the annual resolutions of the General Assembly on Crimea and the human rights situation there. Helsinki worked to maintain Ukraine's territorial integrity in institutional bilateral and multilateral channels, and is involved in formulating international declarations and decisions on this subject (Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 2021, pp. 8-10).

Helsinki's restraining moves peaked when it joined the sanctions regime imposed by the EU on Russia (Rosendahl & Heneghan, 2016). Finland was one of the most proactive actors advancing sanctions, along with Germany, Sweden, Denmark, and others (Kulesa et al., 2017, p. 21), in spite of certain doubts as to their efficacy and their harm to the Finnish economy (Rosendahl & Heneghan, 2016). For example, large Finnish companies that supply dairy products to Russia sustained significant losses after sanctions were imposed on Moscow (Anishchuk, 2014). In practice, Russia had been Finland's most significant trading partner, until 2015 when it fell to fifth place (Kunz, 2018, p. 8). As of 2021, Finnish exports to Russia totaled \$4.4 million (4.2 million euros), or 5.4 percent of its total exports (Workman, 2022a). That same year, Finland was only Russia's 14<sup>th</sup> largest trading partner; Russian exports to Finland totaled \$9.7 million (9.46 million euros), or 2 percent of Russian total exports (Workman, 2022b). During the first half of 2014 the trade volume between the two states plummeted 8 percent, to \$8.3 million (8.1 million euros) (Anishchuk & Chopra, 2014). Likewise, the year after Crimean annexation, Finnish exports to Russia declined by 35 percent and imports by 37 percent (Kunz, 2018, p. 8). The Finns did not hesitate to go beyond economic sanctions, and as members

of the Schengen Convention denied visas to Russian citizens from the Crimean Peninsula and Sebastopol, which had been annexed by Russia (Schengenvisa Info, n.d.).

Despite the gradual change in Finland's threat perception and move toward a use of diplomatic restraints in light of Russian conduct, Finland did not make a total break. The Finns had a pragmatic approach, whereby it was imperative to speak with their Russian neighbor (Kunz, 2018, p. 7). Finland and the EU had an interest in maintaining border arrangements with Russia, and joint projects in the fields of climate, the Baltic Sea, and the Northern Dimension Initiative (Ekengren, 2018; Henriksson, 2018). The dialogue between the states continued in spite of the crisis of border arrangements initiated by Moscow in 2015 (Saari & Lavikainen, 2022, pp. 5-6), evidenced by the lines of communication between Helsinki and Moscow that remained, especially at high levels (Pesu et al., 2020, pp. 14-16): in 2014 Finnish President Niinistö spoke with Putin several times, and was the first European statesman to conduct shuttle diplomacy between Sochi and Ukraine aimed toward reaching a ceasefire (Järvenpää, 2015, pp. 2-3). Diplomatic contacts also continued in the summer of 2016, when Putin visited Helsinki (Mouritzen, 2019, p. 18).

### **Toward Joining NATO—Following the Russian Invasion of Ukraine (2022)**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reflected an additional, severe exacerbation of Russia's conduct and Finland's threat perception, in the context of the balance of threat theory and perception of intentions. To date, the decline in European security and the Russian challenge to the current order that drove the invasion have terminated Helsinki's attempts to bring Russia into the European community via diplomatic means. The worsening threat and the possible change to the balance of power also caused a clear change in Finnish doctrine, from reliance on soft power means to an intention

to lean largely on military power. In 2022 the government announced an increase to the defense budget of more than \$2.2 billion, and its intention to purchase 64 F-35 jets; together with the regular defense budget these expenses made up 2 percent of its GDP, comparable to the proportion during the Cold War (Pohjanpalo, 2022). Most noteworthy is Finland's intention to join NATO as a full member, which constitutes a deviation from its traditional security policy.

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**Soft power means used by small and weak states can allow them to strengthen their security and compensate for their relative inferiority of strength and size when facing rivals, without the use of forceful means.**

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## Conclusions

International relations literature describes small states as implementing a variety of strategies aimed at enlarging their security margins and surviving struggles with powerful rivals. Nonetheless, there is little discussion of the importance of soft power means in small states' security doctrines. To fill this lacuna, this paper examines how a small state such as Finland, which lives in the shadow of the threat of a great power, made use of soft and hard power tools in order to strengthen its security, not only militarily. It strengthened its institutional influence in international and regional organizations, brought the rival power closer to it, and restrained its aggressive conduct. The paper uses Walt's balance of threat theory to explain how threat perceptions and counterstrategies used by small states such as Finland are influenced by material relations, that is, by military capabilities or military buildup processes that rival states are pursuing, and especially as a result of aggressive or moderate conduct, as part of the perception of intentions component. In particular, the theory helps examine the changes in Finland's security doctrine over time, and the soft and hard power tools it used after the end of the Cold War.

The study found that during 1992-2013, Russia's military-diplomatic-economic weakening compelled it to act moderately in most cases and to seek diplomatic compromises for resolving disputes, within a unipolar system of American hegemony. According to the balance of threat theory and the perception of intentions component, the change in Russian conduct and thus in the international atmosphere eased Finland's threat perceptions, and it decided that the conditions were ripe for it to join the EU as a full member. In light of the rise of the liberal order and weakening of the politics of power, the wide new space for maneuver that opened up for Finland as a small state encouraged it to leverage its status and unique location in Europe, to be actively involved in diplomacy and to apply soft power toward both the EU and Moscow.

Finland's dual use of soft power was due to both pragmatic and value considerations, and most of its leaders supported this policy. It sought first and foremost to strengthen the EU and its institutional structure. This conduct by Finland helped it expand its security margins not only through military means, and to achieve nonmaterial aims such as improving its status, prestige, and influence in the region and around the world. Second, as a small state, the use of soft power tools aimed to assist Finland in improving its overall balance of power vis-à-vis its neighbor, Russia, which exceeds it in almost every material parameter. This was accomplished by actions aimed at moderating Russia's conduct through diplomatic and other tools, bringing it into the European community and promoting liberalization of its society and regime—a process that failed the test of time.

From the mid-2000s, Russia began rebuilding its military and economic power, while pursuing an assertive foreign policy challenging Western hegemony—processes that peaked with the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the outbreak of the war in eastern Ukraine in the second period of analysis. As the balance of threat theory and its perception of intentions

component predict, Russia's aggressive conduct and determination to change the balance of power during the second period of analysis, until the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, led to increased uncertainty in the international system, weakened the trust between Russia and Finland, and exacerbated Helsinki's threat perception.

As a result of the weakening of the liberal order, and as Finland felt increasingly insecure due to Russia's conduct, there was a clear turn away from soft power elements of Finnish doctrine. Finland did not break off ties, and assessed that it still needed to maintain certain diplomatic contacts with Moscow, but it turned away from its intention of advancing the integration of Russia in the European community peacefully (Prime Minister's Office Publications 2016, pp. 22-23). Accordingly, instead of an outlook that promoted integration, Finland implemented a different strategy, in which it used hard power means to influence EU decisions on the use of diplomatic measures aimed at restraining Russia's conduct, in an attempt to reduce the threat it faced. This occurred while arming itself militarily to some degree but maintaining neutrality.

In other words, during the first period discussed (1992-2013), Finland enjoyed wide space for maneuver, thanks to Russia's weakness, thus allowing the small state to maximize its regional and international influence and attempt to moderate its neighbor's conduct with diplomatic tools and via soft power. In contrast, during the second period (2014-2022), Finland concluded that Russia's conduct in annexing the Crimean Peninsula and its aspirations to change the balance of power and regain its superpower status reduced Finland's room to maneuver. Due to this threat becoming more acute, Finland reduced its use of soft power means and relied more on hard power, while taking refuge under the diplomatic umbrella of the EU.

The third period of analysis, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reflects—

according to the balance of threat theory—a possible return to the era of territorial conquest in Europe and the strengthening of neorealist sentiment in the international system. Russia's aggressive conduct, which threatened to topple the existing order and fundamentally change the balance of power, led to a severe worsening of Finland's threat perception, and the latter concluded that it needed to make a strategic change. It thus appears that Finnish doctrine has reached a turning point, creating an explicit tendency to prioritize military power over diplomatic influence and soft power means. The change is clearly reflected in Finland's intention to increase the defense budget to levels approaching those during the Cold War, to purchase advanced weapons, including F-35 stealth jets, and above all, to join NATO.

In conclusion, soft power means used by small and weak states can allow them to strengthen their security and compensate for their relative inferiority of strength and size when facing rivals, without the use of forceful means. This assumption is valid when small states struggle with powers that conduct themselves in a moderate way and are willing to advance diplomatic compromises. But when Russian aggression toward Ukraine increased, it seemed to limit the ability of small states such as Finland to moderate the aggressive conduct of powers with non-military tools and change the balance of power in their favor. In other words, although soft power may be a significant force multiplier for small states characterized by inferiority and military weakness, the importance of alliances and other hard power components that took center stage again with the worsened security situation in the world remains. Increasing global uncertainty left no choice to Taiwan, the Baltic states, and other threatened small states but to follow Finland's path for the near future, enter security alliances, and arm themselves with military tools in order to improve their security.



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## Notes

- 1 For more on this, see Miller & Rubinovitz (2020), pp. 38-41.
- 2 The Treaty promised that Finland would be in the military-economic-political influence zone of the Soviet Union, and thus refrain from joining up with the West (Faloon, 1982, p. 4; Pursiainen & Saari, 2002, pp. 15-16).
- 3 The Helsinki Process that led to the establishment of the OSCE.
- 4 For more on the North Atlantic Cooperation Council, see <https://bit.ly/2RVGvb0>.
- 5 Common Foreign and Security Policy, within which states commit to allocating resources for missions of peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and crisis management, and oppose policy that harms international law, human rights, the rule of law, and democracy (Forsberg & Moyer, 2022).
- 6 In the framework of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1997. Its aim was to promote cooperation between the EU and Russia in trade, economy, and issues of energy, climate, research, education, culture, and security (Kapoor, 2021).
- 7 The conference was held in Moscow in 2002, in Helsinki (in 2004 and 2012), and in Saint Petersburg (2009).
- 8 Cooperation between NATO and Finland began in 1994, when it joined the Partnership for Peace program. For this reason, Finland participated in missions in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Relations with Finland, 2022).