



## Between the eagle and the bear: Explaining the alignment strategies of the Nordic countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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# Between the eagle and the bear: Explaining the alignment strategies of the Nordic countries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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## ABSTRACT

This article shows that all four Nordic countries, i.e., Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, have adjusted their alignment strategies when responding to the changes in their external environment during the twenty-first century. Furthermore, our findings indicate a great diversity among the four states in their responses. All too often, security policy analyses cluster small states into allies and non-allies, respectively. However, this article suggests that alliance affiliation in isolation is not sufficient for explaining small states' behavior and adjustments of their strategies. Occasionally, previous experiences of armed conflicts as well as perceptions of strategic exposure provide stronger explanatory power.

## Introduction

This article departs from the claim that analyses of defense strategies of specific countries should acknowledge that states come in different shapes and sizes and that their alignment and military strategies are affected by both power asymmetries between more and less resourceful states, and unit-level characteristics. In a previous study, we explored the strategic adjustments of four small states, i.e., Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, to the changing external security environment of the twenty-first century.<sup>1</sup> In this article, we will use a more elaborated operationalization of the dependent variable, i.e., defense strategy, and direct increased attention on explaining differences in strategic adjustment between the four states. The concept defense strategy combines two interconnected levels of strategy, alignment strategy and military strategy, and is defined as more or less coherent ideas on how politically defined strategic ends should be achieved through a combination of alignment strategies and suitable strategic ways of developing and employing military means. In this article, the focus is on the former part, i.e., on the alignment strategy.

Our aim is to contribute to previous research in two main ways. First, we want to contribute to contemporary research on small states by reintroducing an empirical focus on alignment strategies.<sup>2</sup> The need for a renewed attention to questions related to small states' security interest and strategies is motivated by changes in the international system of the twenty-first century. During the first two decades of this new millennium, the world has witnessed a return of great power competition creating a much more uncertain and challenging international environment for all states.<sup>3</sup>

Second, we aim to complement mainstream structural realist research and research within Strategic Studies on strategy by focusing on strategies of less resourceful states. Both these traditions have generally focused on the strategies of great powers, often treating states as “like units.” If we are correct in arguing that power asymmetries between states will force less resourceful

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states to develop strategies that are different compared to the strategies of more resourceful states, this would indicate that a continued focus on the strategies of great powers will leave the vast majority of the actual strategies pursued by states belonging to different categories unexplored and untheorized.

More specifically, we will analyze how four potential external shocks – the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, the Russian war against Ukraine in 2014 and the rise of the Islamic State (IS) and the Caliphate in 2014 – have influenced the alignment strategies of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden during the two first decades of the twenty-first century. Following Colin Gray, we define a *strategic shock* as “an event that is not expected, not anticipated as at all probable by political authorities, and whose consequences are deeply consequential.”<sup>4</sup> As this definition makes clear, the occurrence of a strategic shock is dependent on the involved actors’ perceptions, i.e., whether or not an event is unexpected and perceived as deeply consequential and demanding counter measures. Strategic shocks may also affect individual states differently. The four shocks represent two very different types of strategic challenges for small states. The first and fourth shocks triggered requests from a friendly superpower for contributions to military crisis management and for a global war against terror, raising questions related to international security and abilities to contribute to multinational military operations against primarily non-state actors. The Russian-Georgian war and Russia’s annexation of Crimea and further military engagements in other parts of Ukraine are examples of traditional security threats concerning the protection of territorial integrity, the future of the post-Cold War security order in Europe and the strengthening of capacities needed for national and/or collective territorial defense.

The challenges to develop military capabilities related to responses to the first and fourth shocks are not unique for small states, neither is multilateral military crisis management a novel phenomenon. Defense transformation processes aiming to increase capacities for needed for expeditionary warfare and contributions to international multilateral operations have occurred among many greater European states. These processes begun already in the 1990’s, driven by a perceived need to share costs, risks and responsibilities among participating states hoping to gain influence or security against threats from various transnational non-state actors.<sup>5</sup> However, and in contrast to more resourceful states such as France, Italy or the United Kingdom (UK), most European small states lacked both capabilities and traditions related to expeditionary warfare, especially operations involving high-intensive warfare. Moreover, these transformations of national defense forces also took place in the context of constant or shrinking defense budgets. Consequently, many European states reduced their ambitions regarding traditional territorial defense, hence making them less capable of presenting unilateral responses to the kind of strategic challenges presented by the potential second and third shock. To reverse a defense transformation process that has redirected the main purpose of the armed forces from national or collective territorial defense to international military crisis management is both very costly and time consuming. In addition, if the relevant threat comes from an unbalanced great power, these efforts would in most cases also be ultimately futile. Responding to a deteriorating regional security environment, small states therefore have to rely on cooperation with likeminded states to a larger extent than more resourceful states.

This leads us to the two research questions of this article: *To which extent have the Nordic countries adjusted their alignment strategies following these changes in their external environment and how can differences and similarities in their responses be explained?*

From a structural point of view, the four Nordic states are in many respects similar: They are stable and prosperous democracies, located in the same corner of the northwestern part of the Eurasian continent. Traditionally, they have shared a similar preference for multilateral diplomacy and they have been cooperating with each other and formulated common strategies in matters related to international security in both United Nations (UN), its predecessors the League of Nations and during the Haag-conferences 1899 and 1907.<sup>6</sup> In terms of relative power, they are all

third-ranked states, being less resourceful than great powers and major western middle powers such as Canada and Germany, but more resourceful than microstates.<sup>7</sup> For an observer unfamiliar with the general defense policies of the Nordic countries, these similarities may produce expectations that the four states will pursue similar defense strategies and respond to external changes in a uniform manner. Obviously, there are some common elements in their strategies relating to their common regional context, to their dependence on external actors and to their limited military capabilities. However, there are also fundamental differences between their strategies. In this article, we focus on differences and similarities between the four Nordic analyzing a covariance between three unit-level characteristics and each states' respective strategic responses to the four abovementioned shocks. More specifically, we will analyze to which extent differences and similarities in their alignment strategies can be explained by three national unit-level characteristics: i) membership in military and political alliances, ii) previous experiences of armed conflicts and iii) perceptions of strategic exposure.

This article shows that all four Nordic countries adjusted their alignment strategy at least once during the period of our exploration. At the same time, our findings indicate a great diversity among the four states when responding to the changes in their external strategic environment. All too often, security policy analyses cluster small states into allies and non-allies, respectively. However, this article suggests that alliance affiliation in isolation is not sufficient for explaining small states' behavior and adjustments of their strategies. Occasionally, previous experiences of armed conflicts as well as perceptions of strategic exposure provide stronger explanatory power.

### **The concept of small states**

The category of small states, or small powers, begun as a “residual” category as small states were defined by what they were not, i.e., great powers or middle powers.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between small and great powers emerged in the beginning of the nineteenth century in the final phases of the Napoleonic Wars, when less resourceful states were excluded from the group of leading states that determined the content of peace agreements. The position of small states gradually improved during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.<sup>9</sup> Despite the rather lengthy history of small state studies, there are still divergent views on the proper definition of small states. An early group of scholars used definitions based on specific levels of *quantifiable characteristics* such as the size of national economy, population and military capabilities.<sup>10</sup> A common criticism directed toward quantitative positional approaches concerns the unavoidable arbitrariness of specific quantitative “cut-off line” separating different categories of states.<sup>11</sup>

Other small state scholars focus on *qualitative characteristics* and patterns of behavior among small states. According to this research, small states are more sensitive changes in the balance of power and more dependent on support from other states or institutions than more resourceful states. They more often faces threats to their survival and have to concentrate their resources to short run and local matters and quickly adjust to changes in their external environment such as the breakdown of systems for collective security, increased tension between great powers and unfavorable changes in the distribution of power between the main competing regional or global great powers.<sup>12</sup> According to an early prominent scholar, Annette Baker Fox, small states – in contrast to great powers – practices “anti-balance of power” strategies, by complying with demands from expansive and threatening great powers.<sup>13</sup> Facing an imminent threat from a great power, small states, according to Robert Rothstein, has to choose between a range of alignment strategies (e.g., neutrality, non-alignment or appeasement) that would seem “clearly irrational” for a great power in the same position.<sup>14</sup> More recently, some scholars have suggested a *relational definition* of small states focusing on the asymmetric power relation between specific states. Accordingly, a small state is defined as “the weaker part in an asymmetrical relationship” that is “unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on its own.”<sup>15</sup>

Inspired by Robert Keohane's fourfold distinction between system-determining, system-influencing, system-affecting and system-ineffectual states, we suggest a distinction between four categories of states that combines elements of the qualitative and relational approaches and focus on military capacities relevant for analyzing responses to the four strategic shocks.<sup>16</sup> Small states are assumed to generally perceive themselves in line with third-ranked states. In contrast to first- and second-ranked states, the political leadership of a third-ranked state recognizes that it cannot obtain security against an attack from first- or second-ranked states primarily by use of its own capabilities. In addition, the leadership of a third-ranked state does not believe that it can lead and organize unilateral or multilateral military operations. However, the leadership of a third-ranked state does believe that it can defend itself against states with similar or lower rank and that it has the ability make significant contributions to multilateral military operations. Fourth-ranked states have extremely limited or no military capacities, and its political leadership recognizes that it cannot obtain security against an attack from any higher ranked state or make significant contributions to multilateral military operations.<sup>17</sup> When this ideal-type categorization is applied to actual states, it is important to consider the psychological factor. It is perfectly possible that the political leadership of a particular state believes that it alone can defend itself against a higher ranked state or lead and organize multilateral military operations. If such an effort was successful, the specific third-ranked state would demonstrate some of the characteristics of a higher ranked state on this particular parameter.

In later works on middle powers, we have complemented this fourfold distinction with categories based on quantitative differences between four main categories of states and indicators on political recognition of status. When using indicators of economic strength (gross domestic product, i.e., GDP and GDP per capita), military capabilities (global power projection and nuclear capabilities) and political recognition (permanent membership in the UN Security Council, i.e., UNSC), we identified five system-determining states, in the present international system. The United States (US) as the sole superpower, the emergent potential superpower China and the three great powers France, Russia and the UK. We also identified a group of "major middle powers" using the negative criteria of not being system-determining states and the positive triple criteria of reaching world top 20 in terms of i) annual GDP; ii) accumulated defense expenditure and iii) having a political recognition and status through membership in the Group of Twenty (G20). In our initial research, we conclude that the major middle powers mostly correspond to the category of second-ranked states.<sup>18</sup> Due to the arbitrariness of quantitative thresholds, we find it difficult to distinguish a definitive dividing line between potential "minor middle powers" and small states.<sup>19</sup> However, we expect that states belonging to these two categories will in most cases perceive themselves along the lines of third-ranked states. Regarding the lower threshold, small states can be distinguished from an even less resourceful category of states: microstates. Having less than 400 000 inhabitants, a GDP of about 29 billion US dollars, and virtually no defense force, Iceland, the fifth Nordic country, is an example of a microstate. In addition, we consider it necessary to distinguish between western-oriented democracies with highly developed economies situated in regions with comparatively low war expectations, and domestically politically unstable countries (weak states) situated in regions characterized by regional conflicts and high war expectations.<sup>20</sup> The four Nordic countries included in this study can therefore be categorized as belonging to a subcategory that has been labeled "western democratic small states".<sup>21</sup>

### ***National unit-level characteristics***

In efforts to present small state research as a subfield within broader academics field, such as Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and International Relations (IR), small state scholars have often focused on similarities among states belonging to this subcategory.<sup>22</sup> In this article, the focus is instead on explaining both differences and similarities in strategic responses among four, in several other aspects, rather similar small states. More specifically, we will analyze the influence from

national characteristics relating to membership in military and political alliances, previous experiences of armed conflicts and the own state's geographic position and corresponding perceptions of strategic exposure. Experiences of armed conflicts and national geographical characteristics have been analyzed as important contextual elements in research on national strategic cultures.<sup>23</sup> The focus on unit-level factors also creates some ties to neoclassical realist research.<sup>24</sup> However, unlike some of the research within the neoclassical tradition and most FPA research, we will not enter the arena of domestic politics. Instead, we will hold on to the classical realist perspective of states as unitary actors.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding *membership in alliances*, we argue that small states, compared to great powers, are more dependent on external factors when weighing the options of joining or staying outside a military alliance. Membership may limit their autonomy, and they also risk entrapment within an alliance. On the other hand, small states that stay outside alliances risk abandonment.<sup>26</sup> However, it is not clear from previous research to which extent membership in military and/or political alliances influences small state alignment and military strategies. Our four Nordic countries display a mix of memberships in military and political alliances useful for evaluating the influence of this variable. If membership in military alliances had a decisive influence on the choice of alignment strategy, we should expect the two members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), i.e., Denmark and Norway, would pursue similar strategies that are different from the alignment strategies pursued by Finland and Sweden, i.e., the two non-military aligned states. Finland and Sweden, on the other hand, are members of the European Union (EU) and participate fully in its defense and security cooperation of the Union. Norway is not an EU member, while Denmark, even though a member, does not participate in the Union's cooperation on defense and security. The findings in this article indicate that that alliance affiliation in isolation is not sufficient for explaining small states' alignment strategies. Indeed, our analysis of the Nordic countries even suggests a generally low correlation between alliance affiliation and strategic priorities. One exception to this relates to efforts concerning collective defense. On this issue, members of a military alliance have options that are not open to nonmembers.

The influence of *previous experiences of armed conflicts* is well documented. This influence may take the form of "historical lessons," in which case historical examples may be either a part of a learning process or used as a way to legitimize a particular course of action.<sup>27</sup> Experiences during great power wars are, according to Dan Reitner, particularly influential and states tend to repeat successful alignment strategies and reverse unsuccessful strategies.<sup>28</sup> According to Darryl Howlett and Jeffrey Lantis, defeat in war is an additional aspect in this regard.<sup>29</sup> The experiences of the Nordic countries during the First and Second World War (WWI and WWII) confirm these arguments. Denmark, Norway and Sweden, i.e., the then independent Nordic states, declared themselves neutral in 1914 and also managed to stay outside WWI. In the beginning of WWII, Finland (that gained independence from Russia during WWI), along with the other three states, tried to practice the same strategy of isolation in relation to the great powers. However, this time only Sweden managed to avoid an armed aggression. For Denmark, this was the third time within a century it was fighting a war with Germany.<sup>30</sup> Contrary to Denmark, Norway did not immediately surrender to the German invaders in 1940. The Norwegian-armed forces continued, alongside Norway's British, French and Polish allies, the armed resistance for some months. Finland did not only defend its independence during the Winter War, it also fought the Continuation War with the Soviet Union (USSR) 1941-1944 as well as the Lapland War with Germany during the last months of 1944. Responding to this experience Denmark and Norway became two of NATO's founding members in 1949, while Sweden continued to practice a peacetime policy of armed neutrality. In the Agreement of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance of 1948 with the USSR, Finland had to accept restrictions on its alignment policy and committed itself not joining an alliance involving Germany.<sup>31</sup>



In line with previous research, we expect that the different wartime experiences of all the four states during particularly WWII may produce different responses to the second and third shocks. However, analyses of lessons learned should not be restricted to success or failure of previous alignment strategies. They should also include an analysis of each state's previous wartime experiences with specific states acting as aggressors or allies. Regarding shocks two (Georgia) and three (Ukraine), the potential adversary clearly is Russia. While Russia has been the traditional arch-enemy of Finland and Sweden for centuries, providing both countries with deep-formative national historical experiences, neither Denmark nor Norway shares the experience of fighting several wars against Russia. Furthermore, in the last phases of WWII, Soviet-armed forces liberated Northern Norway and the Danish island Bornholm in the Baltic Sea from the German occupiers.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, the potential influence of previous experiences of armed conflicts is not restricted to interstate wars. All Nordic states share similar experiences contributing to international peace support operations. It has been estimated that the Nordic countries together contributed with 125,000 soldiers to peacekeeping missions during the Cold War, which was about 25 percent of the total number of UN forces at that time. The intimate cooperation and coordination between the Nordic countries on these operations has made some researchers speak of a specific "Nordic Approach to Peace Operations."<sup>33</sup> Consequently, if previous experiences related to peacekeeping operations have explanatory power, we expect the four Nordic countries to pursue similar alignment strategies in their responses to shocks one (9/11) and four (IS).

The influence of national *geographical characteristics* is also firmly documented in traditional realist and strategic research.<sup>34</sup> In this article, we focus specifically on one geographic aspect: national perceptions of strategic exposure. The concept of strategic exposure relates to a basic precondition for a successful policy of non-alignment: that the small state must be strategically irrelevant for all parties in a potential or ongoing major conflict.<sup>35</sup> Strategic exposure is at the other end of the spectrum, i.e., a situation in which a small state, without the necessary national means to protect itself, faces one or several of the conflicting powers having a strategic interest controlling parts of its territory. When analyzing the different fates of the Nordic countries during WWII, differences in strategic exposure arguably explain why Sweden was the only state that managed to avoid an armed attack. Finland was strategically exposed because the USSR perceived it necessary to consolidate its position in the geographical surroundings of Leningrad. Germany had great strategic interest related to both Denmark and Norway. Germany considered it necessary to secure winter-time deliveries of iron ore from Sweden, crucial for German defense industry. Furthermore, Germany strived for controlling the North Sea and the entrance to the Baltic Sea. Paradoxically, the invasion of Denmark and Norway improved the Swedish position, making it more difficult for France and the UK to intervene militarily to stop the iron ore export to Germany. Arguably, as long as Sweden continued to trade with Germany and accepted some concessions such as German troop transports through Swedish territory, the cost for Germany of invading Sweden would not up-weight the benefits.<sup>36</sup>

Regarding the challenges from transnational terrorism, strategic exposure related to national geographical characteristics is of less relevance. When analyzing the Nordic region in general military strategic terms, the four Nordic countries are arguably equally exposed also to threats related to military conflicts in the Baltic Sea region involving Russia and a member state of the EU and/or NATO. Moreover, ever since the beginning of the Cold War the four Nordic states have arguably been "strategically interdependent." It is, in other words, very difficult to imagine a scenario in which only one of the four states suffers an armed aggression with the other states remaining outside the conflict.<sup>37</sup> However, when we approach the question of strategic exposure from a national perspective, different answers occur. Finland shares an almost 840-mile-long land border with Russia. Furthermore, St. Petersburg as well as the major Russian military bases on the Kola Peninsula are located close to Finnish territory. Norway also has a common border with

Russia with close proximity to the major Russian naval base in Murmansk. In addition, Norway has territorial claims in the Arctic of increasingly global strategic importance. Denmark and Sweden lack land border with Russia. Consequently, if strategic exposure has explanatory power we expect Finland and Norway to behave similar in the responses to shocks two (Georgia) and three (Ukraine).

### **Defining alignment strategy**

In this article, defense strategy is defined as interconnected ideas on how politically defined strategic ends should be achieved through a combination of alignment strategies and suitable strategic ways of developing and employing military means. Alignment strategies refer to different ways of interacting on a political level with other states and organizations to promote the own state's strategic objectives. This aspect of strategy constitutes a basic element of states' external efforts to promote their perceived interest. Military strategy concerns the creation, direction and use of national military capacities. This aspect of strategy focuses on states' internal efforts to promote their interest by developing and using the own state's military resources either unilaterally or multilaterally.<sup>38</sup> In this article, the focus is on the former part of the defense strategy, i.e., on alignment strategy. Alignment strategies can be divided into four basic options: i) balance of power; ii) bandwagoning; iii) isolation and iv) hedging. These alignment strategies may be pursued both within and outside an alliance and members of an alliance may pursue different alignment strategies.

Balance of power strategies are essentially defensive strategies aiming at avoiding losses.<sup>39</sup> This aim is achieved by creating counter weights to expansive powers in order to increase costs for further expansion. Both first-ranked powers and secondary states are, according to Waltz, expected to "flock to the weaker side" thereby avoiding their main threat: that one state establishes itself as a hegemon.<sup>40</sup> Within an alliance, states can *chain gang*. This strategy includes stronger commitments to agreements on collective defense and offers of military contributions to allied contingency planning or war efforts. Other members may instead pursue a more isolationist strategy and *pass the buck* to some or several of their allies, hence free riding on the security provided by other members of the alliance. Outside an alliance, states can also pursue a buck-passing strategy or a strategy of *courting*. The latter strategy includes measures to increase the possibility of receiving support from a particular state or a specific alliance as well as measures to enhance the ability to give and receive military assistance.<sup>41</sup> Isolationistic strategies may differ in intensity. Active efforts to promote the own state's interests in relation to the great powers is, by Ole Elgström, termed *distancing*. The opposite of this strategy consists of a passive approach, i.e., avoidance of involvement in great power conflicts, i.e., *hiding*.<sup>42</sup>

According to Stephen Walt, bandwagoning may be pursued with two distinctly different motives. Defensive bandwagoning may take the form of an *appeasement* policy toward a threatening actor, aiming to avoid an attack by diverting it elsewhere. Bandwagoning pursued for offensive purposes, "bandwagoning for profit," involves alignment with the dominant side in a war "in order to share the spoils of victory."<sup>43</sup> For the purposes of this study, *offensive bandwagoning* is defined as strategy primarily motivated by perceived opportunities for gains and includes support to a non-threatening state or alliance. Furthermore, this strategy includes cooperation with the stronger side in a conflict and substantial contributions to common efforts. *Defensive bandwagoning*, on the other hand, is defined as a strategy including unilateral concessions to a threatening state or alliance in order to promote the security of the own state. In more recent publications, Walt has updated his analysis of strategic alternatives by focusing on less resourceful states responses to the U.S. unipolar power.<sup>44</sup> The alignment strategy *regional balancing* presents an additional motive for establishing closer ties with the unipolar power: the desire for protection against a local regional threat. However, since this strategy is primarily directed toward



**Table 1.** Alternative alignment strategies.

Balance of power	Bandwagoning	Isolation	Hedging
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Chain-ganging</i></li> <li>• <i>Courting</i></li> <li>• <i>Regional balancing</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Offensive (for profit)</i></li> <li>• <i>Defensive (appeasement)</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Active (distancing)</i></li> <li>• <i>Passive (hiding)</i></li> <li>• <i>Buck-passing</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Leash-slipping</i></li> <li>• <i>Multiple-courting</i></li> </ul>

countering a regional threat, it should, in the terminology of balance of threat theory, be considered a specific form of balance of power.<sup>45</sup> A fourth main alignment strategy is hedging. These strategies may include efforts of *multiple courting*, i.e., a combination of alignment strategies involving cooperation with several different states or institutional settings. In 2009, Walt presented an additional hedging strategy: *leash-slipping*. In applying this strategy, states form an alliance or establish common institutions in order to “reduce their dependency on the unipole by pooling their own capabilities.”<sup>46</sup> In Table 1, the outcomes of the dependent variable are summarized.

### **The Nordic countries responses to the shocks**

We retrieved the empirical material for the analysis solely from primary official sources related to the defense decision-making process in each of the Nordic countries. Consequently, we used bills, committee recommendations, commission reports, etc., in our text analysis. Since the processes are not identical among the countries, there is a discrepancy. Arguably, these differences do not affect the result of our comparison.<sup>47</sup> In order to fully explore whether the four strategic events actually led to a change of strategy, we explored their strategies when entering into the new millennium. Arguably, Denmark seems to have adopted a *bandwagoning for profit* strategy vis-à-vis NATO and ultimately the U.S.<sup>48</sup> We also argue that Finland strived for balancing the power of Russia. Internally, i.e., through the military strategy, this was achieved with for a small state relatively large armed forces. This was also the main line in the Finnish defense strategy. Consequently, the external efforts, i.e., the alignment strategy, was at this stage considerable weaker. An option interpreting the Finnish alignment strategy could hence be isolationism, i.e., similar to the strategies applied by both Finland and Sweden during the Cold War. However, already during the 1990s, Finland took several steps approaching the western powers. Primarily, the Finnish efforts in these regards were channeled through Finland’s EU-membership. Moreover, Finland changed its procurement strategy toward closer cooperation with the U.S. not least regarding the transformation of the Finnish Air Force. Since these steps in this stage must be considered being too weak, we argue that courting is not an appropriate label of the Finnish either. Consequently, we classify the Finnish alignment strategy being *unclear* before the first shock.<sup>49</sup> Also regarding the Norwegian case, it was hard finding clear evidence. In this case, the challenges were related to whether Norway was preparing for a bandwagoning or a balance of power strategy. We nevertheless claim that the Norwegian government tend to favor the latter and a *regional balancing* approach with the ambition securing primarily U.S. support.<sup>50</sup> Finally, we argue that Sweden was balancing the contribution to NATO- and UN-led international operations by taking steps for increased cooperation within the EU. Consequently, we conclude that Sweden prepared a *multiple courting* strategy.<sup>51</sup>

The **9/11 terrorist attacks** are generally perceived as a strategic shock.<sup>52</sup> A surprise attack by an international terrorist organization using commercial air flights to strike at the heart of a world hegemon’s financial and military power centers was unimaginable not only for the Nordics countries. President Bush’s ultimate statement “you’re either with us, or against us” made hedging a difficult option to pursue at this Rubicon.<sup>53</sup> In the aftermath of the attacks, all Nordic countries contemplated their own exposure and vulnerability. In all Nordic states but Finland, this infamous event did qualify as a strategic shock. In Denmark, international terrorism surfaced as a key threat.<sup>54</sup> The newly formed government in Norway argued that the attack was a trigger for the

defense reform.<sup>55</sup> Also in Sweden, the event shaped the subsequent defense bill, mainly as a justification to reassess the international security order.<sup>56</sup> In addition, the government launched a special inquiry to review the national preparedness for a similar event. Notwithstanding the ultimate demand of support by the American President, Norway opted for a *multiple courting* option. At this point, focus was on bolstering relations with the EU and the military instrument became an instrument to that end. The response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks was a means to hedge its interests. We label the responses of both Denmark and Sweden as *bandwagoning for profit* as they contributed to advance the fight against international terrorism in the UN, the EU and NATO in accordance with the priorities set out by the U.S. Finland, on the other hand, reacted to the event but curtailed their response by traditional priorities, i.e., Russia; hence, the impact was of lower magnitude.<sup>57</sup> The attacks, it was contemplated, confirmed the need for a broad perspective on security. Still, it was not considered to increase risks for attacks on Finnish soil.

Obviously, membership in military alliance does not explain the outcome since Denmark and Norway applied different alignment strategies. In addition, the military nonaligned states, i.e., Finland and Sweden, also pursued different strategies. Moreover, the fact that Denmark and Sweden applied the same alignment strategy further undermines the explanatory power of this variable. Regarding previous experiences of contributing to international peace support efforts, we expected all four Nordic states to respond to the first shock in a similar manner. Since this was the case for all three countries that actually perceived the terrorist attacks as a shock, the explanatory power of previous experiences seems strong. As previously mentioned, challenges from transnational terrorism are of less relevance when analyzing the explanatory power of strategic exposure.

When reviewing the **Georgian war**, it is clear that it did not have the same magnitude of global impact. However, it was ultimately about the future of European security order and, as such, a potential major concern. Arguably, the mounting global financial crisis diverted some of the international attentions. Among the Nordic countries, it was only Finland and Sweden that fully grappled with the event as a strategic shock. During that period, both Denmark and Norway appear to have been more concerned with risks in the Arctic region, especially regarding competition over strategic resources. Indeed, the Georgian war made no lasting impact in their policy documents.<sup>58</sup> In Sweden, the war intersected the ongoing defense deliberations and it was indeed a significant event.<sup>59</sup> In essence, the policy on Russian relations switched from inclusion to exclusion. The security equation emphasized that Sweden needed to pay more attention to its neighborhood and operationalize the new security doctrine based on a unilateral declaration of support to its Nordic and EU partners. At the same time, this step was taken without decreasing the attention on participating in NATO-led operations abroad. Consequently, Sweden returned to a *multiple courting* strategy. Finland, at the helm of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), was in the midst of the situation from the onset and intimately involved in the efforts leading to the six-point peace plan.<sup>60</sup> Finland made far-reaching conclusions on the increased Russian military capabilities and their willingness to employ military force. A special report on the event provided an extensive analysis on Russia and its implications on national security. Finland appears to have complemented its traditional policy of unilateral defensive balance of power toward Russia with a *courting* strategy. More specifically, it did so within the frames of an EU context by firmly committing Finland to the evolving assistance clause of the Treaty of Lisbon. Contrary to Sweden, Finland did not participate in the NATO operations in Libya.

Since NATO did not respond promptly to the Russian invasion of Georgia, the membership in the Alliance can potentially explain Denmark's and Norway's lack of response. At the same time, the similar reaction of the both military nonaligned states can partly explain Finland's and Sweden's behavior. Since NATO did not balance Russia's aggression, it could be perceived necessary to undertake some individual actions. More importantly, both Finland and Sweden shared

similar experiences of Russian military activism, which both Denmark and Norway did not. Previous experiences can therefore explain both the similarities and the differences among the four Nordic countries. Clearly, since Sweden has not been in war with Russia since 1809, the experiences from WWII do not provide enough explanatory power in itself in this regard. Even if Georgia is rather remote from the Nordic region, the strategic exposure can provide an additional explanation to the Finnish case. However, since the Norwegian responses did not correspond with the Finnish ditto, exposure in itself cannot explain neither Norwegian nor Swedish behavior.

The Russian illegal annexation of Crimea and the following **war in Ukraine** turned out to be a strategic shock for Denmark, Finland and Sweden, albeit for different reasons and with different magnitude. In Sweden, the Cabinet issued a new defense bill in 2015 that was exceptionally critical of Russia. More importantly, the Armed Forces were reoriented toward national defense including reintroduction of conscript service as well as stronger bilateral cooperation, with, primarily, Finland, the UK and the U.S., respectively.<sup>61</sup> The buildup of national capabilities in tandem with enhanced defense cooperation, with NATO and non-NATO countries, suggests an intensified *multiple courting* approach. For Denmark, the shock did not primarily shake its own territory but spurred it to prepare, enable and assist defense of the Alliance against a Russian aggression.<sup>62</sup> Arguably, it is reasonable to classify Denmark's as *chain-ganging*. To some extent, Finland regarded the event as a confirmation of earlier assessments of Russia, following the Georgian war.<sup>63</sup> In fact, an official report had warned that Ukraine might fall victim to Russia's behavior. It was still a shock as priorities were changed and the event may have contributed to a new policy on bilateral defense arrangements with Sweden and the U.S., respectively. Additionally, in September 2014, the Armed Forces of Finland and Sweden simultaneously signed an agreement on Host Nation Support with NATO. Consequently, we conclude that Finland adopted a *multiple courting* strategy. Though Norway concluded that Russia did not constitute an immediate threat, the concerns grew.<sup>64</sup> This was further perpetuated by Russia's aggressive behavior in Norway's vicinity. Still, the deliberations did not constitute a change in Norwegian priorities.

Contrary to the Georgian case, this time NATO did respond to the Russian use of military force. Since Denmark and Norway nevertheless approached the renewed challenge differently, membership in a military alliance obviously does not explain their choices of alignment strategies, at least not in the Norwegian case. The similar behavior of Finland and Sweden indicates correlation between their responses and non-alignment. Since the three states that experienced great power invasions during the 1940s reacted differently, we conclude that the general experiences gained from WWII do not provide potential explanations. On the other hand, the two countries with similar specific negative experience of Russia, i.e., Finland and Sweden, did respond similarly. Finally, since the two countries most strategically exposed to Russia, i.e., Finland and Norway, behaved differently, we conclude that strategic exposure cannot explain the outcome in the Norwegian case. At the same time, the two countries least exposed, i.e., Denmark and Sweden, did react in similar manner by establishing closer ties to NATO.

When considering **the rise of the Caliphate** and its terrorist actions, the perceptions among the Nordic countries also differ. Only in Denmark did the event qualify as a strategic shock.<sup>65</sup> In Norway, the fatal experience of homegrown right-wing terrorism in 2011, the Caliphate was not elevated to the level of national security concerns.<sup>66</sup> In a similar vein, the Finnish deliberations regarded IS as one of several toxic networks that provided a fertile ground for an increase in international terrorism.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, IS in itself did not constitute a specific challenge. Rather, it was the challenge of international terrorism in general. Finland's contributions to the coalition effort to defeat IS were an act of solidarity as opposed to a measure for national security. Despite the high priority of human rights and dignity for all people in the world, the Swedish security policy seemed to pay comparable little military attention to the maiming and barbaric actions pursued by the Caliphate.<sup>68</sup> However, Sweden was an ardent supporter of Syria and Iraq in terms

**Table 2.** The alignment strategies of the Nordic countries.

	Entering the new Millennium	11 September Attacks	Georgian War	War in Ukraine	IS & the Caliphate
Denmark	Bandwagoning for profit	Bandwagoning for profit	<i>Not perceived as a shock</i>	Chain Ganging	Bandwagoning for profit
Finland	Unclear	<i>Not perceived as a shock</i>	Courting	Multiple Courting	<i>Not perceived as a shock</i>
Norway	Regional balancing	Multiple Courting	<i>Not perceived as a shock</i>	<i>Not perceived as a shock</i>	<i>Not perceived as a shock</i>
Sweden	Multiple Courting	Bandwagoning for profit	Multiple Courting	Multiple Courting	<i>Not perceived as a shock</i>

of humanitarian aid and continued to champion human rights and democracy in the region through international institutions. Although victim of an Islamic terrorist attack in Stockholm in 2010, Sweden did not nest IS in its national security context. In Denmark, however, a broad political consensus made a timely response through extraordinary decision-making procedures on the aspirations of a new Caliphate. Not only was IS singled out as a key adversary, it was considered a threat to security in the Middle East as well as an increasing risk for the west, including Denmark, in terms of terrorist attacks. In addition, Danish IS-terrorists returning from the Middle East constituted a security concern. Consequently, Denmark acted promptly by contributing early on in the coalition with a robust military force package to defeat IS. Indeed, Denmark was at the forefront of the American coalition that was established, and it can be concluded that Denmark opted for a *bandwagoning for profit* strategy.

Also in this case, NATO did respond to the threats emanating from the IS. However, as in the Ukrainian case, Denmark and Norway responded differently. Consequently, we argue that membership in the Alliance has limited explanatory power, at least in the Norwegian case. Notably, the two nonaligned countries did react similarly, i.e., not much at all. Potentially, this can be explained by their reaction caused by the previous example, i.e., the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both Finland and Sweden may, in other words, been focusing on the perceived major threat, i.e., Russia. Since only Denmark responded to the challenges of the IS, one could conclude that previous experiences also lack explanatory power regarding the different reaction to the Caliphate. However, we argue that using the experiences gained from peacekeeping missions during the Cold War may be misleading in analyzing responses to the fourth shock. Contrary to the other three Nordic countries, Denmark did, for example, contribute to the high-intensity combat operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s. Consequently, Denmark gained different experiences. On the other hand, both Norway and Sweden did contribute to the operations in Libya in 2011. In particular, Norway hence provided resources for the most high-intensity phases of the operations.

The alignment strategies applied by each Nordic country after the strategic events are presented in [Table 2](#) aforesaid. To summarize, all events were regarded as shocks in at least one country but no event generated a strategic shock in all countries. Notably, all countries have changed their strategy at least once. Clearly, small states not only have options but also use them.

## Conclusions

The strategy of small states is inherently reactive as they adopt and adjust to an external environment that cannot be shaped, let alone controlled, if left to its own devices. Still there is room to maneuver. Our analysis demonstrates that a variety of strategies apply. Small states' alignment strategies include balance of power, bandwagoning, hedging and isolationism. We have, with the potential exception of Finland just before the first shock, not found any clear examples of the latter strategy in this study, which is explained with reference to a perceived strategic exposure and

**Table 3.** Potential explanations to the strategic behavior.

	11 September Attacks	Georgian War	War in Ukraine	IS & the Caliphate
Denmark	NATO-membership Peace-Keeping tradition	NATO-membership Lack of exposure	NATO-membership	NATO-membership Peace-Keeping tradition
Finland	Other exposure	Arch-enemy Strategic Exposure	Arch-enemy, non-aligned, Strategic Exposure	Other exposure
Norway	NATO-membership Peace-Keeping tradition	NATO-membership		
Sweden	Peace-Keeping tradition	Arch-enemy	Arch-enemy, non-aligned	Other exposure

interdependence. So how can the differences and similarities be explained? In Table 3, the potential explanations to the strategic behavior is summarized.

All too often, security policy analyses cluster small states into *allies and non-allies*, respectively. This article suggests that alliance affiliation in isolation is not sufficient for explaining small states' behavior and adjustments of defense strategies. Indeed, the choices examined suggest a rather low correlation between alliance affiliation and strategic priorities. Denmark and Norway provide examples of NATO members choosing bandwagoning, balance of power and hedging strategies, while Finland and Sweden provide examples of military nonaligned states choosing the same strategies. We do, however, argue that Denmark's NATO-membership has the strongest explanatory power regarding the Danish strategic behavior.

It has been argued that *experiences of previous armed conflicts* – including perceived failures or successes of previous alignment strategies, military defeats or victories and experiences of aggression or military assistance from other states – provide significant explanatory power to understand the strategies of small states. However, we claim that the different fates of the Nordic countries' in the last hegemonic war (WWII) have weak explanatory power when exploring the variations between the four countries' strategies. We claim that Finnish and Swedish strategic behavior also has to be analyzed against the background of formative experiences relating to previous wars against Russia. In the Swedish case, these wars occurred during several centuries. The first peace treaty between Sweden and Russia is, for example, from 1323.<sup>69</sup> In addition, we do believe that Denmark's experiences from previous international military operations have explanatory power in the Danish responses to the first and fourth shocks. However, these experiences differ in character. The experiences explaining Denmark's response to the first shock were based on the traditional peace keeping operations during the Cold War and the 1990s. The explanation to the response to the fourth shock is rather to be found in Denmark's more recent experiences from the participation in different operations within the frames of the U.S.-led global war on terror during the twenty-first century.

*Geographic characteristic* such as proximity to neighboring great powers, relative landmass and location of major cities plays a fluctuating role in determining security of small states in that it provides an understanding for the strategic positioning, or makes up the strategic base, for each state. However, we argue that perceived strategic exposure is more relevant than actual distances in miles. In our exploration, strategic exposure has explanatory power mainly in the Finnish case.

Admittedly, we do not identify any clear aspect with strong explanatory power regarding the Norwegian case. However, awareness of *limitations in relative military capacity* has led all four countries to pursue strategies that include cooperation with more resourceful states and/or institutions and expressed an awareness of the necessity to cooperate with others to protect and promote their security interests. Potentially, this awareness can provide explanations regarding Norway's strategic behavior.

The lack of clear and strong explanatory power makes us conclude that focusing solely on alignment strategies is not enough in order to fully understand small states' defense strategies. Consequently, we argue that explorations in their military strategies can provide additional and



necessary insights in this regard. While alignment strategies guide the defense strategies at a political-strategic level, the ends-ways-means triad provides a powerful tool for analyzing and comparing military strategies. Our definition of small states included aspects of power asymmetries between states regarding the use of military capacities and a psychological dimension emphasizing the importance of the perceptions of the political leadership. Despite differences in alignment strategies, all four countries pursued strategies that included cooperation with other more resourceful states or institutions and they expressed an awareness of the necessity to cooperate with others to protect and promote their security interests.

## Notes

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