

Narrating Security: Multimodal Representation of NATO and the Nordic Evolving Geopolitical Landscape

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Abstract

This study explores how NATO as an international defence alliance is portrayed, communicated, and interpreted with regards to Finland's and Sweden's NATO memberships. The recent decision to join NATO marks a significant shift in Finland's security policy, with broad implications for regional and global security dynamics. Particularly Finnish public media was chosen due to Finland's unique geopolitical position and long-standing commitment to neutrality. In this study, we examine how public media discourse reflects such changing historical contexts and shapes the representations and possibly interpretation of security and NATO's – as an international defence organization – role in it. To analyse the Finnish security debate within a new geo-ethics-political context, we combine a critical discursive and narrative approach and focus on the multimodal representation of security. We identify four antenarratives: distancing, objectifying, spatializing, and embodying. We argue that these antenarratives give rise to two grand narratives – imperialist and idealist – with different implications for how securitization, and NATO, is narrated in the public.

Key words: security, securitization, narratives, CDA, multimodality, military, NATO

Introduction

In an era characterized by pervasive social outrages, the world has accumulated into a continuous chain of global cosmology episodes, defined as events 'when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system' (Orton & O'Grady, 2016). Recent crises such as armed wars, the pandemic and environmental hazards could be considered 'more than human' and of such existential magnitude that these challenge individuals' sense of ontological security, i.e., our 'confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity' (Giddens, 1984, p. 375). Ontological security embraces how stable perceptions of relationships one holds with the world, and subsequently narratives of the self, inherently constitute the sense of human existence (Giddens, 1991).

(In)security is not merely a feeling but also a condition shaped by socio-political, economic, and environmental factors. In these disruptive times, security and ontological security become a powerful narrative resource, shaping organizational responses and public perceptions while reflecting underlying politicized processes (Godfrey et al., 2014; Grey, 2009). For example, notions of security can be used as a narrative resource to benefit an organization's positioning in the public domain and, as such, utilized as 'impression management' to shape organizational image (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Cosmology episodes are often amplified by media coverage and digital platforms, where global interconnectedness of societies is enabled that can fundamentally impact the erosion of security. Empirically, we place our study in the intersection of (in)security, military organizations and institutions, and media, examining how narratives—told, lived, and multimodally expressed—shape and are shaped by the evolving geopolitical and ethico-political landscape. By focusing on the evolving aspects of these dynamics, we aim to unpack the ways in which storytelling and narratives, as meaning-making and shaping processes, contribute to the construction, negotiation, and contestation of (in)security in the public display. We ask: *How do multimodal narratives in public media manifest different representations of security, notions of a 'safe' society, and for whom?*

To explore this, we focus on how NATO's role in global and local security is portrayed, communicated and interpreted in Finnish public media. Our analysis is based on Finland's historical relationship with NATO, which has been shaped by its unique geopolitical situation - in particular its relationship with Russia and its long-standing commitment to neutrality. However, the country's recent decision to join NATO marks a profound change in its security policy, reflecting wider regional and global security dynamics. This historical context is crucial for understanding how NATO's role is currently framed and interpreted in Finnish media.

Building on ontological security, we offer a narrative framework for understanding how public media narratives influence the sense of (in)security for individuals and communities in times of crisis. Crisis situations can undermine established beliefs about the world, and narratives constitute a generative force in shaping these perceptions by providing a sense of continuity and coherence. This may also address vulnerabilities and contains risks for individuals, organizations and societies to (re)negotiate their place in the world, confirming or challenging dominant discourses of security. In this way, our study contributes to the understanding of how ontological security is shaped in collectives, and what impact it could have for collective action and social cohesion. It explores the role of multimodality in communicating different realities and a focal organization's role in it, in the public display. In practice, our study offers valuable insights into the ways in which NATO's security agenda is constructed and potentially received by the public. It also provides an opportunity to critically assess, and increase transparency on, the impact of media on public perception of international organizations and global security.

Security as narrated

Security studies, originating from political science and international relations, remain unfortunately as relevant today as they were in the aftermath of the Second World War (Balzack, 2011; Grey, 2009; Krause & Williams, 2002). While traditionally associated with military, masculine, and state-centric connotations (Ashcraft & Muhr, 2018; Grey, 2009; Godfrey, Brewis, Grady & Grocott 2014; Steidl & Brookshire, 2019), the concept of security has since expanded to encompass various dimensions of society, organizations, and human experience.

Security represents a complex interplay of individual and collective experiences, the instrumental and tactical use of (in)security, and its deeper ontological and political implications (Grey, 2009; Balzack, 2011). For instance, governments may invoke ‘national security’ to justify surveillance, curtail freedoms, or implement policies that disproportionately affect the lived experience of marginalized groups. Rather than addressing the root causes of insecurity, such measures often reinforce systemic organizational inequalities and exacerbate societal insecurities. Considering these complexities, there is a pressing need to reconsider and strengthen the understanding of the concept of security and critically deepen our understanding of the relationships between media, organisations and society (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), especially in terms of their relations and practices of power. Furthermore, this reimagining must account for a more fundamental understanding of human and non-human existence within the broader socio-environmental context. Therefore, through narratives, political agents and representatives of the state design concepts, categories, interpretations, and memory – which are all used as foundations for the construction of security.

These narratives provide military, politicians, and the state a simple and transferable message through which they motivate people and justify various securitization policies in the eyes of the public (Balzack, 2011). We posit that narratives operate as mediators between organizations and institutions such as military and the society, reflecting and responding to the shifting geopolitical global context. The security concept is not only articulated through politics, policies and institutional settings but also embedded within the stories people tell and the modes of representation through which they are conveyed—whether through language, visuals, digital platforms, or embodied practices. By understanding how multimodality can provide different narrative representations that bridge the personal and collective, the local and global (Höllerer et al., 2018), a lens is provided to examine how security is envisioned in the Finnish NATO membership process covered in public media.

Narrative inquiry, as Bruce and colleagues (2016: p. 2) describe, involves ‘the study of experience as story and a way of thinking through storying.’ Told and lived stories, along with their multimodal representations, are central to how individuals construct meaning, navigate uncertainties, and foster a sense of security in their lives (Woolhouse, 2017). Stories, conveyed through multiple modes—such as spoken words, written texts, visual imagery, bodily expressions, and digital media—offer diverse pathways for interpreting experiences, creating coherence, and addressing vulnerabilities (Woolhouse, 2017). These elements, as Connelly and

Clandinin (1990) suggest, provide insights into human experience, demonstrating how multimodal storytelling helps individuals and communities understand the past, engage with the present, and anticipate the future. Through this process, stories serve as critical tools for navigating uncertainty and securing meaning across dynamic contexts.

Our multimodally informed narrative methodology explores how sociality, temporality, place, and the varied modes of storytelling intertwine in narratives to reveal how individuals are represented as secure amidst uncertainty. Storytelling reflects the continuous process of living, telling, retelling, and even reimagining experiences (Bruce et al., 2016), mediated through multiple communicative forms to understand audiences lived and expressed experiences (Page, 2013). We believe that multimodality can enrich these dimensions by illustrating how personal conditions (emotions, hopes, and reactions) and social conditions (cultural, environmental, and existential influences) are articulated through different narrative and multimodal forms (Dewart et al., 2019; Page, 2013; Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007). Temporality acknowledges that stories evolve across past, present, and future, often shifting modes of representation over time, to reflect personal and contextual changes, and place situates these multimodal narratives within specific physical and situational contexts, underscoring how different forms of storytelling contribute to individuals' sense of meaning and security.

Multimodal storytelling—whether through spoken dialogue, written reflections, visual art, or digital narratives—provides a rich, layered understanding of lived realities (Alcaraz et al., 2024). It captures the interplay of various sensory, symbolic, and expressive modes that audiences use to make sense of their experiences. A multimodal narrative approach is anchored in the ‘storying’ process, where multiple narrative forms uncover recurring themes and patterns, offering a sense of continuity amidst disruption (Bruce et al., 2016). Multimodality also enables audiences to engage with narratives in dynamic ways, enhancing reflexivity and providing a platform for meaning-making that transcends linguistic expression. We posit that media become a particular actor in shaping narratives of security and distributing these in the public sphere. In covering crisis and major global events, media engage in sensemaking and sensegiving efforts. Through multimodal narratives, media link representations of phenomenon with broader discourses, ultimately shaping how we regard events and institutions (e.g., Höllerer et al., 2018). To explore such efforts during a major crisis, which spurs an inherent sense of insecurity in society, we apply an antenarrative analysis (Boje, 2001) of the media coverage of Finland’s NATO membership process, which we turn to next.

Research Context and Methods

Research context

The socio-cultural history of Finland is deeply intertwined with the military and the country’s socio-political identity, particularly regarding conscription policies. Unlike the other Nordic countries, Finland retains compulsory conscription for men, a policy rooted in its wartime history (Ahlbäck et al., 2024; Kouri, 2021). This enduring practice links military service with citizenship, emphasizing the role of national defence as a civic responsibility and a core component of Finnish securitization. The compulsory service has also cultivated a large reserve

force who are on call until the age of 60 (Puustinen et al., 2018). While Nordic neighbours such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden led the way in integrating women into military roles in the 1970s and 1980s, Finland opened military opportunities for women in the mid-1990s (Ahlbäck et al., 2024). In 1995, Finland granted women the right to voluntarily participate in military service alongside men, who were still subject to mandatory conscription (Ahlbäck et al., 2024; Kouri, 2021).

Finland has historically remained a non-member of NATO until the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 directly linked with its history with the Eastern neighbour. Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden for almost 700 years before lost to the Russian Empire during the Finnish war (1808-1809). Finland became the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland part of the Russian Empire until gained independence in 1917 following from the collapse of the Russian Empire in WWI. In 1918 Finland suffered a Civil War between the Reds and the Whites, the former supporting Russia. In 1939, the Soviet tried to occupy Finland during the Winter War.

NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) offers collective defence and security to its member states in the case of attack by all members agreeing to defend other NATO countries. It was established in 1949 in the aftermaths of WWII. Finland, which shares a 1 340 km direct geographical border with Russia and remained as a “sphere of interest” for the Soviet Union after WW2, signed a treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance with its eastern neighbour in 1948 and practiced a neutrality policy known as ‘Finlandization’ up until the erosion of the Soviet bloc in the late 1980’s (Uutela, 2020). The discussion on joining NATO has been ongoing yet became accentuated in the public during Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The decision to apply for NATO membership received unanimous support in the Finnish Parliament. Today, Finland is a full member of NATO.

Research material

This study retrospectively examines publicly available material from Finnish public service media (YLE). The selection of public service media is informed by the argument that such platforms possess significant power to influence public opinion, particularly in times of crisis or societal upheaval, when media narratives play a pivotal role in shaping collective understanding and response (e.g., Höllerer et al., 2018). Public service media, by virtue of their broad reach, public funding, and commitment to impartial reporting, are key actors in the dissemination of information during pivotal moments, such as national security challenges and geopolitical shifts.

The dataset comprises at the time of writing, around 400 articles published between February 2022, marking the onset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent acceptance of Finland's NATO membership, along with the aftermath of these events until February 2025. This timeframe was deliberately chosen to capture the evolution of public discourse surrounding Finland’s security and defence policy, as well as the broader implications of the NATO membership. In our data collection process, we included all articles that referred to NATO or the Finnish military, ensuring a comprehensive sample of the public dialogue surrounding Finland’s changing security landscape. By focusing specifically on these themes, we sought to identify the framing and narratives employed by Finnish public service media in

relation to the NATO membership and national defence during a period of heightened geopolitical tension.

The public debate, particularly after Finland's formal accession to NATO, has been multifaceted, addressing a variety of concerns regarding the country's defence posture. Discussions have centred on the potential impacts of the membership on Finland's overall defence capabilities, exploring how the NATO integration could enhance military readiness and collective security. Additionally, there has been significant attention to the broader concept of national security, encompassing not only military defence but also civilian and voluntary defence systems. The evolving narratives reflects both the uncertainties and opportunities presented by the NATO membership, with public debates highlighting how Finland's security framework might navigate or adapt to the changing global security environment. An overview of the key events related to Finland's NATO membership process, including pivotal milestones and shifts in public opinion, is provided in Table 1.

Year	Key event
February 2022	Russia invades Ukraine
May 2022	The President of Finland Sauli Niinistö and PM Sanna Marin announce that Finland should apply for NATO membership Formal decision to apply is made by the president and the foreign and the security policy department The Swedish government decides to apply for NATO membership Finland and Sweden submit the NATO membership applications Turkey vetoes the applications The President of the US Joe Biden expresses his strong support for Finland's and Sweden's membership applications The Finnish president Sauli Niinistö and Sweden's PM Magdalena Andersson meet President Biden in Washington DC

June 2022	Finland, Sweden, and Turkey sign a trilateral memorandum during the NATO summit in Madrid, Turkey assures to lift the veto if certain terms are realized
August 2022	The US senate unanimously approves Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership applications President Biden signs the ratification document that approves the memberships
November 2022	Sweden's PM Ulf Kristersson visits Ankara, Turkey and President Erdogan
March 2023	The Turkish parliament approves Finland's application
April 2023	Finland officially joins NATO
December 2023	The US and Finland sign a defence cooperation agreement (DCA), strengthening bilateral security cooperation
January 2024	After long negotiations, Turkey approves Sweden's application
March 2024	Sweden officially joins NATO
September 2024	Finland's government announces plans to increase expenditures related to the NATO membership, defense and security, such as related to a new combat aircraft fleet

Table 1 Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership processes

Analyses

Our analysis was conducted in three partly overlapping phases. In the first phase, we applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the media material to make sense of the military institution, security, and power relations. In the second round, we zoomed in on the increasingly multimodal constructions enabled by visuals through multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). We regarded discourses as both reflective and constitutive of social realities (Fairclough, 2003) and studied the discursive construction of power and resistance as

well as inclusion and exclusion (Van Dijk, 1993). We acknowledge that journalists hold editorial control over how power relations are represented in media. Overall, we applied CDA and MCDA as an iterative process where we moved back and forth between theory development and empirical analyses (Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA). We first familiarized ourselves with the media articles and how the debate unfolded in the public discursive space. We identified the most frequent themes and observed how these became intertwined with discussions on security. In a more detailed CDA (Fairclough, 2003) we first focused on understanding how security was portrayed, and we developed a coding system for categorizing the meanings expressed that guided our identification of key discourses at play in the material (*globalization, internationalization and localism*).

We then paid attention to how the discourses were produced in the media, for example whose voice was expressed (e.g. the US or Finland) and how it was expressed that enabled the discourses to develop. Finally, we drew attention to how the security debate played out as a broader ‘struggle’, and what the underlying sociocultural and political ideas were that these constructions drew on. We accordingly observed the context of the debate such as the local and national politics and global politics (Vaara & Tienari, 2011).

Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA). We then moved to a phase where we focused on how the Finnish military institution, and inherently security, was portrayed in the articles’ use of visuals. We adopted a multimodal critical discourse analysis approach (MCDA) (Jancsary et al., 2016). We analysed the discourses identified through CDA to detect the functionalities of visuals and their potential to transport messages and manifest discourses.

We iteratively adapted the steps proposed by Jancsary et al. (2016). We first delineated the different modes available in the communication: verbal (verbal texts in articles) and visual (pictures) (Meyer et al., 2018). As the media material also included videos (e.g. interviews with politicians and security experts) we decided to also include moving visuals in our analysis. Following Jancsary et al. (2016) we understood modes (verbal and visual texts) as the different forms discourse(s) can take to create collective meaning and communicate aspects of security.

We first separated verbal (written) and visual texts to investigate their interplay (Höllerer et al., 2018) and to see how security was articulated through a particular ‘vocabulary’ and with specific ‘styles’ (Jancsary et al., 2016). We then considered the composition and meaning of the verbal and visual texts in their interplay. Whereas the function of verbal text concerns arguing for causal explanations, specifying attributes and ordering events under a plot through narrating, visual text can add to such functions by conveying space(s) through *spatializing*, captivate different sentiments by *expressing emotions*, as well as *materialize* and provide tangibility to events, actors, and activities (Meyer et al., 2018).

In addition to such functions, we employed a more detailed semiotic analysis such as how gaze was absent or featured in the photographs, the use of distance (i.e., close vs. long shot) and angle (i.e., high vs. low) and the function of such use (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2020). Through iterative rounds of coding, we ultimately arrived at four multimodal antenarratives that offered different representations of security, inclusion and exclusion.

Narrative analysis. In the third phase of our analysis, we examined how the identified multimodality contributed to the formation of (counter)narratives of security in the public sphere. Narratives serve to establish coherence among actors and events, thereby shaping power relations within ambiguous contexts (Vaara et al., 2016; Sonenshein, 2010). To explore how these narratives emerge, we initially employed an antenarrative analysis, which captures fragmented, evolving stories that precede more structured societal narratives (Boje, 2001). Antenarratives are scattered, fragmented, and in flux; these could be argued to exist ‘before’ grander societal narratives emerge, that come ‘after’ adding plot structure and coherence (Boje, 2001). Examining such acts of ‘antenarrating’ is particularly suitable for contexts that are characterized by high ambiguity in the flow of experiences and speculations that require sensemaking (and sensegiving) (ibid.). We identified four antenarratives in our research material.

The second narrative phase of the analysis was inspired by grand narrative analysis, i.e., ‘the implicit macrostory’, privileging a certain voice, and ‘the little’ stories that resist (Boje, 2001). This second stage of the narrative analysis delved into how the antenarratives cumulated into grand narratives and smaller counter-narratives that shaped the portrayal of security (Boje, 2001). We focused on these narratives and their structure, i.e., the role of key characters and the wider narrative context that gives legitimacy to these narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). A plot typically follows a sequence of events, often starting with a dilemma, reaching a turning point and ending with a resolution. Some plots are continuous, with a stable destination, while other plots undergo a change, with the protagonist’s journey changing. Characters can either drive the story forward or be influenced by external events. In addition, these stories are often aligned with broader, established frameworks, such as common stereotypes of people or situations.

We identified two grand narratives of security: imperialist and idealist. The imperialist narrative constructs the Finnish military as losing power, while the idealist narrative focuses on national empowerment and self-determination. Looking at media coverage over time, we found that both narratives were present throughout the NATO accession process, as well as to some extent also overlapped. However, the imperialist narrative became more prominent after the Russian invasion, while the idealist narrative became stronger in the later stages of the process.

Findings

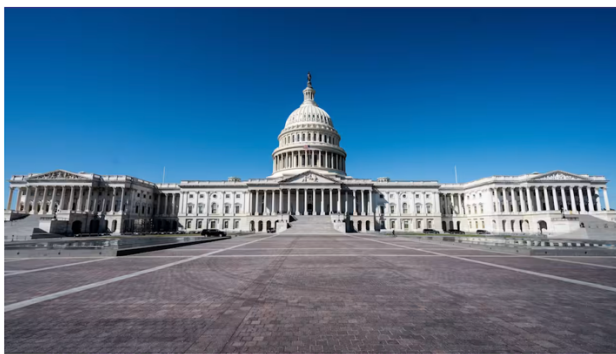
Multimodal antenarratives of security in the media

Through the multimodal critical discourse analysis, we identified four multimodal antenarratives that (re)produce competing future realities of the military institution (i.e., actors and objects) in times of disruption.

Distancing. Distancing refers to the domination of a ‘west’ oriented discourse and places the military institution and questions on security on the international scene, frequently materialized in pictures of international as well as national politicians. The photographs pictures Finland (often together with Sweden) stepping into the international military scene by joining NATO. For example, it includes images of President Biden welcoming political leaders of the Nordic

countries, such as the Finnish and Swedish Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers or Defence Ministers, standing side by side, shaking hands, engaged in conversations, or walking together.

In the images, the President, the White house and other key institutions or leaders of the NATO assembly representing the ‘elite’, are frequently shot from a frontal angle suggesting involvement. Such visual representation provides tangibility to the evolving political negotiations and to some extent power plays, and materializes power relations inherent in key historical and global institutions. This is predominantly made using distance. One example is a photograph of the US Senate in an article explaining how the senate has approved the memberships. It is shot from a long distance suggesting that the senate is ‘out of reach’ and something offered for mere reflection. The slight low angle creates an atmosphere of power residing in the building.



Yhdysvaltain senaatti hyväksyi Suomen ja Ruotsin Naton jäseniksi. Kuva: Michael Brochstein / SOPA Images / AOP

As such, the frequent use of long shots creates an impersonal distance. The overall message that emerges is that the two countries are welcomed into the military alliance, however (inter)national security rests in the hands of other powerful players, such as the US or critical key political leaders dictating Finland’s and Sweden’s NATO memberships, such as Erdogan.



Ruotsin pääministeri Ulf Kristersson ja Turkin presidentti Recep Tayyip Erdogan käättelevät presidentinlinnassa Ankarassa, Turkissa 8. marraskuuta. Kuva: Necati Savas / EPA

Objectifying. The second set of multimodal antenarratives encompasses implicit representations of global and national discourses, and their intertwinement. It is manifested through picturing NATO as a global security organization and Finland’s and Sweden’s historical joining it. It pictures flags with the NATO logo from a low angle, suggesting a grand institution and domination of such. In addition, images picturing other national and Nordic flags in

connection with the NATO one, enhances the message that Finland's and Sweden's security is derived from NATO. The flags constitute national symbols that communicates solidarity and strength in uniting nations, yet the frequent placements around the NATO flag suggests a power distance.



Suomen Nato-edustusto siirtyy Naton päämajalle, jos Suomi liittyy Natoon. Kuva: Stephanie Lecocq / EPA

Spatializing. Spatializing encompasses depersonalized representations of prospective 'grand' military futures. It provides tangibility to the global security discussion and materializes it in a local (Finnish) sphere. Photographs picture 'abstract' military representations, where the gaze of individuals is turned away from the viewer, creating a sense of offering a reality, or military objects in centre and in focus, often shot from a long distance. This communicates that the individuals placed around the object in centre derive their meaning from the object. It creates a mystified, even romanticized message of new military futures, holding a sense of doom and threat, at the same time as hope.



Suomen F-35-hävittäjähankinnat ovat merkittävä syy puolustusbudjetin nousulle. Norjalaiset F-35-hävittäjät Pohjois-Savossa Baana-harjoituksessa, syyskuussa 2023. Kuva: Toni Pitkänen / Yle

Embodying. Such pictures stand in contrast to the concrete and personalized representations of the present and future reality of the Finnish military institution at the 'micro' level. These form a core message of inclusion and opportunity of the national and local military institution. This includes depictions of young recruits engaged in military activities (formal as well as informal) or (smiling) officers. Officers are predominantly men in army suits. The gaze is on the viewer, suggesting a demand, that they are part of the viewer's world. The use of close shots and eye-level angle forms a representation of someone to associate oneself with, familiarity, and suggests equity and the absence of distance or power relations.

The photographs also place the future Finnish military in an international context; a small nation ‘belonging’ to the global stage, an entry that will ‘transform’ the Finnish overall defence ability. This is for example evident in a photograph not related to Finland but describing Finland’s potential future military inclusion. It pictures a woman recruit standing in front of a group of soldiers holding the NATO flag. It materializes a group of citizens (women) not traditionally considered to be part of military security or defence, whose gaze is on the audience, demanding action.



Naissotilas pitelee Naton lippua sotaharjoituksen loppuseremoniassa lähellä Liettuan Vilnaa joulukuussa 2016. Mikäli Suomi liittyy Natoon, tulisivat harjoitukset mahdollisesti lisääntymään myös Suomessa. Kuva: Olivier Hoslet / EPA

Grand narratives of securitization

The antenarratives over time accumulate into two grand narratives of securitization. As a result, we present two overall grand narratives of securitization, imperialist and idealistic (see Table 2).

Narrative	Key characteristics	Antenarratives	Plot and seriality	Main characters of security represented in media	Positioning of the audience
Imperialist	Instrumentalized notion of local militaries	Distancing and objectifying	Grand superpowers or institutions of the 'West' saves smaller nations from the evil 'East'	Political sphere (Male) leaders of powerful nations	Exclusion; mystification, disempowering, elitist Global and local security rests in the hands of a (inter) national elite
Idealistic	Aesthetic framing of the military institution and future	Spatializing and embodying	A nation collectively rising towards a dark historical force, battling, and succeeding	Local society The united and collective force of the nation	Inclusion; romanization, empowering Local security rests in the hands of the nation and all its citizens

Table 2 Details of the Imperialist and Idealistic securitization narratives

Imperialist. First, the imperialist narrative unfolds as a narrative of a grand ‘West’ as the key protagonist in times of social outrage. Balzacq describes securitization as a complex set of practices in which a securitizing actor mobilizes a range of heuristic tools—such as metaphors, policy instruments, analogies, emotions, and stereotypes (Balzacq, 2011). Through this strategic deployment, the actor aims to shape the audience's perceptions and reactions, framing a referent object as critically vulnerable (Balzacq, Léonard & Ruzicka, 2016). This emotional and cognitive resonance ultimately aligns the audience's sentiments with the actor's reasons for action, convincing them that a swift and tailored policy response is necessary to counteract the perceived threat. Through media's portrayal of politicians and national and international politics related to welcoming as well as dictating Finland's and Sweden's present and future NATO memberships, such actors become represented as ‘saviours’ from the evil ‘East’. This narrative therefore positions security in the hands of an international (masculine) elite and their subsequent institutions. An overall sense of mystification surrounds securitization, and as such, it functions as a disempowering narrative force, excluding other actors in terms of security agency. This places local military institutions, such as the Finnish one, in an inferior position and a power relation with a dominating international institution, where national and local security derives from international conditions.

Idealistic. Whereas the first narrative unfolding in media carries notions of disempowerment for the Finnish military institution, the second narrative offers national empowerment and a sense of ‘self-management’. One of the most frequently cited definitions of securitization is the notion that it occurs when a securitizing actor uses rhetoric to frame an issue as an existential threat, thereby elevating it beyond the realm of standard political discourse (Buzan, Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, 1998). This process not only amplifies the issue's saliency but also positions it as requiring exceptional, often urgent, measures to protect against it. Such notions of securitization become accentuated in how NATO is narrated to spur a ‘new’ military future for Finland and an altered military workforce. As such, NATO offers a possibility for the Finnish military and for citizens to join and contribute to local and global security, and to engage in a quest of ‘self-discovery’ along the way, ultimately altering the Finnish military institution.

Thus, on the contrary to the imperialist narrative with concrete notions of an exclusive political elite and political realities, the idealistic narrative is indicative of how the local military institution is framed in a romanticized manner for self-representation of ‘who we are’ as a nation entering the international scene. It serves as empowering and inclusive, and it stretches the boundaries of protagonists and agency – security rests in the hands of all actor groups of society. For example, as opposed to depicting warful scenes, resonance is established in the media coverage through a romanticised sense of who key security actors of the military are (men and women) and what military work includes.

In summary, we argue that the multimodal antenarratives give rise to competing constructions of security agency in the public, and accordingly securitization, and creates spatial and temporal ‘frictions’ in their ability to simultaneously communicate inclusion and exclusion. The temporal distribution of these identified narratives in media reporting, and how these followed key events related to the NATO membership process, were shifting over time but also frequently

overlapping. This illuminates media's role in representing the world as it happens 'in flux', however, by storying security and the military institution differently, this results in 'security ambiguity' and competing representations of where security agency rests.

Discussion and conclusions

Through our analysis, we have explored how visuals in media cue different 'worldmaking' strategies (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) for security, and how some elements of the storied world, such as actors and objects, become emphasized while others are downplayed. Our findings have, in particular, implications for security studies and the securitization concept. For organisation scholars, the concept of securitization is beneficial for understanding how issues are framed as threats, thereby pushing these beyond the boundaries of 'normal politics' and into the realm of impression management (Grey, 2009). At its core, securitization is not merely about identifying threats but involves both the politics of threat design—the strategic framing of issues—and the politics of managing these threats meaning the subsequent actions taken in response to these threats. A multimodal antenarrative approach creates possibilities to explore how multimodal storytelling afford sensemaking and sensegiving around environmental events that are not afforded by monomodal forms (Höllerer et al., 2018).

It alerts us to consider how notions of security become explicitly and implicitly manifested in visual representations, beyond the 'control' of security institutions themselves. This adds to studies on security and organization (e.g., Grey, 2009), and revives the security and organizing theoretical discussion as it is particularly relevant in the global security development of today. We also posit that a narrative and multimodal approach unravels the malleability of boundaries surrounding critical institutions during times of social outrage, and how external actors, such as the media, can shape competing representations of security in the public sphere. This is crucial to explore given the development, and accordingly increasing media converge of, the intertwinement of global and local security.

Our analysis has demonstrated that media becomes a key actor of securitization. However, in organizational contexts, the dual process of securitization plays out in how leaders and stakeholders within an organization construct threats to security, both real and perceived, and manage these threats through policy responses, resource allocation, and strategic decision-making. By examining securitization in this way, we can gain insights into how organizations create, manage, and sometimes amplify threats, and the broader consequences of these actions for organizational security and resilience. Such 'world-building' practices (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015) might implicitly or explicitly encompass collective (re)negotiations of human and non-human relationships with the surrounding world. This means that (in)security as a discursive or narrative resource might adopt different shapes depending on (organizational) space and modality. Accordingly, today's security concept benefits from a more critically oriented approach (Krause & Williams, 2002) and a more processual and dynamic view of 'securitization' within and beyond organizations.

In practice, our study offers several important considerations. The use of multimodality in shaping a sense of security throughout societies, such as in Finland, and how security policy

agendas can gain public acceptance, is valuable. The role of the government and legislators in communicating security can influence the degree of openness and complexity through which security policy measures are discussed in society. This means that the NATO process can either promote or hinder social cohesion, depending on how inclusive and open the debate is to different communities. A critical examination of the role of different actors is important as it can reveal how political choices and communication strategies shape public attitudes towards international organisations and global security. This has present and future relevance, particularly in times characterized by increasing global insecurity and geo-political disruption.

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