ARTICLE

Grasping Foreign and Security Policy Change: Patterns and Conditions of Change Among Liberal Democracies

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been perceived as a fundamental shift at the international level, triggering reorientation in foreign and security policy, in particular among liberal democracies. At the same time, beyond such external shocks, states may incrementally adapt their positioning towards international affairs. To shed light on these dynamics, this article aims to quantitatively explore longer-term patterns of foreign and security policy in liberal democracies. In doing so, we make two contributions to the literature: First, we propose a quantitative operationalization of foreign and security policy change, combining military and non-military aspects, to explore the patterns of continuity and change over time (1988–2021), considering 20 liberal democracies. Second, we leverage insights from public policy analysis, in particular the punctuated equilibrium theory, to make sense of the identified patterns. Accordingly, we find support for the proposition that foreign and security policies typically change incrementally and that major change is rare. Moreover, while incremental shifts can be explained by domestic politics and institutional settings, major changes disrupt this pattern. In conclusion, the article discusses the plausibility of the quantitative analysis given the current policy shifts among democracies following Russia's war in Ukraine.

Keywords

foreign policy; foreign policy change; liberal democracies; public policies analysis; punctuated equilibrium theory; security policy

1. Introduction

Students of IR are typically keen on analyzing critical junctures, crises, and other seismic shifts at the international level, which oftentimes coincide with major adaptations of foreign and security policies by individual states. Russia's war in Ukraine is a pertinent example of an event altering the security environment for Europe. Several NATO member states quickly announced the increase of their defense expenditures, ended long-held policies regarding arms exports, and started to adapt their energy policy strategies. Non-NATO members, such as Sweden and Finland, are pursuing a U-turn in their alliance policies in view of Russia's behavior.

Against this backdrop, there is no shortage in the literature of IR and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) to investigate cases of major policy change. However, most of these studies focus on specific decisions or events, such as the end of the Cold War, 9/11, or, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic (see, i.a., Haar & Pierce, 2021; Hermann, 1990; Ziv, 2011). In addition, a substantial part of the literature deals with shifting patterns of foreign policy over time—yet, mostly regarding a circumscribed area of foreign policy, such as nuclear strategy or foreign aid, and, again, in single-country studies (see Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021a for an overview). Important theoretical contributions (see Legro, 2005; Welch, 2005) also use case studies and qualitative methodology in contrast to large-N analysis. Hence, the current literature can still be enhanced by inspecting longer-term patterns of continuity and change across countries and policy fields. In particular, there are only a few studies which apply quantitative methods to scrutinize patterns of foreign and security policy change with an eye on aggregate measures and indicators that consider military as well as non-military policy components. In that regard, our article takes up the recommendation of a recent literature review (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021a, p. 489): "Scholarship should start examining foreign policy change in a more systematic way across countries, foreign policy domains and over time."

The aim of the article is, therefore, to explore changes and continuities of foreign and security policies in liberal democracies from a comparative perspective by inspecting quantitatively the longer-term patterns in this policy area. In doing so, we make two main contributions to the literature: First, we propose a quantitative operationalization of foreign and security policy change, combining military and non-military aspects over time (1988–2021), and considering 20 liberal democracies. Second, we leverage insights from public policy analysis, in particular, the punctuated equilibrium theory (PET), to make sense of the identified patterns. Accordingly, we find support for the proposition that foreign and security policies typically change incrementally and that major change is rare. While incremental shifts can be explained by domestic politics and institutional settings, major changes disrupt this pattern. In conclusion, the article discusses the plausibility of the quantitative analysis given the current policy shifts among democracies following Russia's war in Ukraine.

2. State of the Art and Theoretical Argument

The literature on foreign policy change took off after the end of the Cold War, a period of structural change at the international level, with several conceptual studies on how to assess adaptation in states' choices. The typological work of Hermann (1990) and Rosati (1994)—distinguishing between different levels of change, e.g., "intensification," "refinement," "reform," and "restructuring" (Rosati, 1994)—was particularly important as it influenced subsequent scholarship which applied these typologies to a number of cases.

Overall, as Haesebrouck and Joly (2021a) report in their overview article, researchers were mainly interested in understanding major changes instead of smaller and more incremental shifts. Many of the studies focused on events that led to significant foreign and security policy decisions within single states. More recent examples include Israel's foreign policy turn regarding the Middle East peace process (Ziv, 2011), France's decision to rejoin NATO (Ostermann, 2019), or Britain's international role change after Brexit (Beasley et al., 2021). There is also a substantial literature focusing on change over time, mostly for single countries (see Tsygankov, 2019; Werle, 2013). Far less common, scholars apply a comparative perspective. Notable exceptions include edited volumes with single-case studies (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021b; Rosati et al., 1994); Welch's (2005) monograph on critical junctures and decision-making processes with seven case studies on different countries; Chryssogelos and Martill's (2021) analysis of the evolution of détente strategies during the Cold War era in Germany, France, and UK; and an assessment of foreign policy change among Latin American countries by Merke et al. (2020), which is also one of the few quantitative studies. Hence, summing up the empirical state of affairs, while we do know a lot about single cases, we lack both genuine comparative studies (beyond some notable exceptions) and a systematic operationalization of policy change that can be applied to the selected countries.

In terms of theoretical explanations for foreign policy change, previous studies have discussed a broad array of possible drivers and (to a lesser extent) inhibitors of change. Borrowing Waltz's (2001) concept of the three images in IR research may help to sort potential sources of change and distinguish between international, domestic, and individual factors. At the international level, structural factors, such as changing degrees of polarity after the end of the Cold War (Volgy & Schwarz, 1994) and declining hegemonic power (Lemke & Werner, 1996) have been put forward as drivers for new policies. Moreover, non-structural sources for change, such as singular events (Brexit and Russia's war in Ukraine) have also been found influential as they impact the domestic decision-making arena (Hermann, 1990; Lee, 2012). On the state level, a number of analyses suggest that domestic factors such as budgetary constraints (Brummer & Oppermann, 2021, p. 322), bureaucratic structures (Allison, 1971; Joly & Richter, 2019), and veto players (Oppermann & Brummer, 2018), for example, within coalitions (Kaarbo, 2017) or legislatures (Böller, 2022), matter for foreign policy decisions. Besides, changing governments (Hagan & Rosati, 1994), advocacy coalitions (Haar & Pierce, 2021), or ideologies of domestic actors (Merke et al., 2020) may also affect policies. Finally, change may also be connected to individual leaders and their belief sets (see, i.a., Gustavsson, 1999), e.g., leaders' cognitive orientation (Welch, 2005).

While we can derive insights on the drivers and inhibitors of change from general IR perspectives, there are also more specific concepts aiming at a theory of foreign policy change (see, i.a., Legro, 2005; Palmer & Morgan, 2006; Welch, 2005). One important conclusion from this part of the literature is that change may seldom be triggered by one source (at the systemic or sub-systemic level), but rather that a complex interplay of domestic and international factors shapes the policy mix of states in non-trivial ways. A second conclusion of these specific theories of foreign policy change is to focus not only on major shifts but also to pay attention to continuities (see Welch, 2005, p. 72) and incremental adaptations (see Sinha, 2018).

To sort the laundry list of potential sources and develop theory-informed arguments, we suggest combining the literature of public policy analysis with those of IR and FPA. We contend that it may be fruitful to leverage insights regarding public policy for the case of foreign policy—a connection which received more attention only recently (see Brummer et al., 2019)—since the former is traditionally focused on the ebbs and flows of

policies and the shifting patterns of the policy cycle, while the latter may be better equipped to account for the idiosyncrasies of the policy field and the developments at the international level.

Against this background, we bring together insights from FPA and public policy research to provide a conceptual starting point for grasping foreign and security policy change and to build a theoretical argument about possible factors that may be associated with this change. While we present our proposal for conceptualizing policy change in a way that makes it useable for the comparative analyses below, we briefly discuss how general theories of policy analysis can help us explain patterns of foreign policy.

To do so, we start from the fundamental wisdom of public policy analysis that indicates that policies are usually made in policy subsystems, where experts meet in policy communities to discuss and address policy-related issues (see for instance Baumgartner et al., 2009; Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). These policy communities are rather stable and members share common policy ideas. As a result, policies change only incrementally for longer periods (equilibrium), however, they are sometimes interrupted (punctuations) by a major change. To explain these punctuations, theories of the policy process usually point to changes in external conditions, such as focusing events, or internal aspects, such as the composition of policy subsystems (e.g., due to government changes).

We argue that such "stick-and-slip" dynamics should also apply to foreign and security policy (see, for instance, Joly & Richter, 2019). In fact, second-image theories of FPA emphasize that foreign and security policies are driven by domestic interests within specific institutional settings (Kaarbo, 2015). Also, defense and military policies are governed by large bureaucracies (see Allison, 1971), and are often prepared in stable expert communities that produce reports and white papers to justify their proposals. In turn, this contributes to security policies' path-dependency, for example, through "doctrines" or, when it comes to the procurement of weapons. At the same time, it is plausible that this pattern of incremental change is punctuated at certain points in time. External shifts and shocks that are beyond the immediate control of governments (such as the end of the Cold War, 9/11, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine) can be catalyzing events, triggering such rare but substantial changes. From theories of public policy analysis, and PET in particular, we can thus infer that stick-slip dynamics are to be expected in the area of foreign and security policy—with long periods of incremental changes, due to the subsystem-dominated policy process, and a few disproportionate outbursts as the result of the built-up adjustment pressures. Hence, our first proposition reads as follows: Changes in foreign and security policy should follow the general pattern of "punctuated equilibrium" with many small adjustments and some major policy changes (Proposition 1).

In addition, it is also apparent that the mechanisms that bring about incremental adjustments and major changes are different, although PET can explain both aspects. According to the theory, major changes go along with systemwide attention to a problem—and are mostly driven by external shocks. In FPA, international factors (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021c, p. 10) are the most broadly discussed "external shocks" as they "may lead to a re-conceptualization of security threats and challenges, a re-prioritization of foreign policy objectives, and the emergence of new means of action and foreign policy options" (Blavoukos & Bourantonis, 2014, p. 488).

In contrast, smaller adjustments to foreign and security policies are, according to PET, driven by the policy subsystems and the daily policy-making practices. Policy researchers have, for instance, pointed out the

relevance of party politics (Jensen, 2014; Wenzelburger & Böller, 2020) when studying policy changes. Similarly, trade-offs between budgetary positions (i.e., the famous "guns vs. butter" debate) have been shown to influence foreign policy decisions (see Whitten & Williams, 2011). However, the mechanisms that influence this routine work should, according to PET, be found in the machine room of the policy-making process—quite different, then, from major changes that are expected to be mainly driven by external events. Summarizing these insights from policy theories and FPA scholarship, we can thus posit our second research proposition:
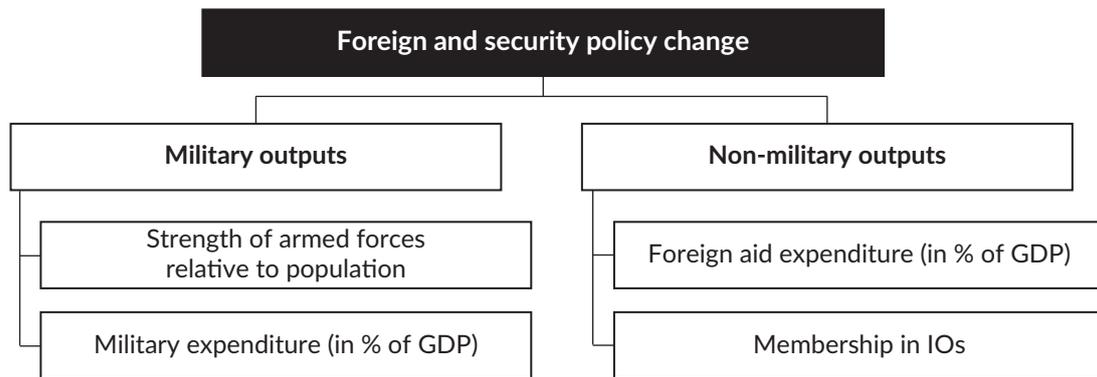
Major change in foreign and security policy is triggered by significant international events whereas smaller adjustments are influenced by party politics and the dynamics of the domestic policy process (Proposition 2).

3. Exploring Quantitative Patterns of Foreign and Security Policy Change

3.1. Operationalization of Foreign and Security Policy Change

In order to quantitatively explore foreign and security policy change, the first step of the empirical analysis aims to develop an operationalization of foreign and security policies that allows to identify patterns over time and between countries. While our approach will enable us to have a bird's-eye view of policy changes and detect some general patterns, aiming for a quantitative exploration also comes with some disadvantages. Importantly, our research strategy cannot account for relevant qualitative changes in foreign and security policy that are not picked up by quantitative indicators. If, for instance, a government decides to follow a new doctrine in foreign policy or to forge a new alliance, this will not necessarily be caught by quantitative measures. In other words: We can only spot changes in degree, not changes in kind. However, going for a large sample of countries and a rather extended period of time (more than 30 years) does allow us to identify regularities that reach beyond single cases or small-N comparisons that have dominated the literature hitherto.

Reflecting this aim, our operationalization of foreign and security policy change differs from qualitative typologies, such as the influential one proposed by Hermann (1990). Most notably, we do not consider programs and goals of foreign policy, but focus on quantitatively measurable instruments and outputs of foreign and security policy. Although we do not go as far as Most and Starr (1984)—who emphasize that foreign policy may involve several substitutable elements of foreign policy, mentioning, e.g., alliance formation and defense expenditure increases (Most & Starr, 1984, p. 387)—we conceptually build on the general idea that foreign and security policies involve both non-military and military aspects that can be seen as "two sides of the same coin" (Wenzelburger & Böller, 2020, p. 6). To operationalize this conceptual idea, we include four indicators: (a) on the military side, the number of armed forces and military expenditures; and (b) on the non-military side, foreign aid spending and membership in IOs (see Figure 1). The choice of these indicators is driven by empirical and theoretical considerations. On the empirical side, a major criterion was the availability of reliable time series data for at least two decades. We have collected the data from different sources—mainly via the World Bank dataset (military expenditure and strength of armed forces), the OECD (spending on foreign aid and development), and the CIA Factbook (hand-coded data on membership in IOs). Regarding the case selection, we focus on OECD countries, as we are primarily interested in liberal democracies (within the focus of this thematic issue), but exclude the US. As the sole superpower after the end of the Cold War, the US can be considered exceptional in terms of military instruments of power, which could lead to a bias in our analysis.

Figure 1. Operationalizing foreign and security policy change.

Conceptually, our indicators clearly relate to the military and non-military domains, but at the same time tap at least partially into different aspects of each of the domains. For instance, concerning the military, it is clear that public defense expenditure will indeed be related to the strength of armed forces, measured via military personnel ($r = 0.5$). However, expenditure is a broader measure and should also take up other aspects of the military side of security policy. Similarly, membership in IOs and spending much on development aid are hardly correlated ($r = 0.045$). In sum, the correlations between the indicators seem to capture somewhat different aspects of each domain (for an overview of the indicators, see Table 1 of the Supplementary File). We thus argue that this operationalization, on the one hand, recognizes the central role of military means in defending states and providing security. On the other hand, foreign and security policy is broader than military defense and encompasses other instruments, such as foreign aid and committing to IOs, to bolster states' security and pursue national interests (see Palmer et al., 2002).

Based on this operationalization, we can see whether the indicators indeed grasp the two sides of foreign and security policy change as previously argued. A systematic way to identify a structure in a set of variables is to perform a factor analysis. We use principal component analysis (PCA) as our main interest is to reproduce a data structure while reducing the set of factors. PCA is a technique to reduce the dimensionality of data by transforming interrelated variables into new hypothetical variables ("principal components"), which are uncorrelated and orthogonal to one another (Salkind, 2010). Following our theoretical and conceptual discussion, we would expect the four indicators to load on two different factors representing the military and non-military sides of foreign and security policy.

Table 1 shows the factor loadings generated by PCA and a pattern matrix after orthogonal rotation. It is evident that the analysis suggests that our four variables can be combined into two factors that together explain around 70% of the variance. Judging from the differences in the eigenvalues, a solution with two factors seems most appropriate (see the difference between Factor 2 and Factor 3 in Table 1). Moreover, the pattern matrix illustrates that the two factors indeed reflect the two theoretical dimensions that we had in mind when conceptualizing foreign and security policy change, whereas the third factor is related to several of the factors from different dimensions. Therefore, we stick with a two-factor solution, where the first factor takes up the military dimension and the second factor is mainly related to non-military foreign and security policy.

Table 1. Results of PCA.

Factor loadings				
Factor No.	**Eigenvalue**	**Difference**	**Proportion**	**Cumulative**
Factor 1	1.72999	0.71232	0.4325	0.4325
Factor 2	1.01767	0.12173	0.2544	0.6869
Factor 3	0.89594	0.53953	0.2240	0.9109
Factor 4	0.35641	—	0.0891	1.0000
Pattern matrix (rotated)				
Variable		**Factor 1**	**Factor 2**	**Uniqueness**
Strength armed forces		0.8606	−0.0449	0.2573
Military expenditure		0.8908	0.0861	0.1990
Development aid expenditure		0.0315	0.9646	0.0686
IOs		−0.4362	0.2870	0.7274

How have foreign and security policies developed over time if we compare the factor scores for the military and non-military components in the 20 countries under review here? The patterns visible in Figure 2 show a rather path-dependent development of foreign and security policy over time. While some larger changes do occur in individual years, the over-time variance is mostly rather sticky. A notable example of this stickiness is the "peace dividend," which is clearly visible after the end of the Cold War in many countries of Western Europe (such as Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and Sweden) and has led to a gradual decrease in military spending. This pattern suggests that the systemic reconfiguration after the end of the Cold War was translated into a gradual change rather than a swift transition in many countries. Major changes can be observed more clearly in the non-military component: In 2015, the Swedish government, for instance, increased foreign aid spending substantially, driven by the number of refugees arriving in 2014 and a respective upsurge of in-donor-refugee expenditure (OECD, 2019). In Portugal, we can also observe a spike in net development aid spending, which occurred in 2004. This was due to a significant debt relief that was granted to highly indebted poor countries (Instituto Camões, 2015, p. 22). Hence, from sheer eyeballing, Figure 2 seems to lend some initial support to Proposition 1—foreign and security policy development over time seems to be characterized by many small adjustments and few major changes. However, at the same time, it is also interesting to see that there are no visible common shocks that may have led to strong adjustments in all countries (apart from the longer-term decrease of military spending due to the "peace dividend" after the end of the Cold War)—although such common shocks have existed, e.g., with 9/11.

This observation does point to the relevance of national specificities in how governments respond to shifts at the international level and overall country profiles. Figure 2 indeed shows substantial cross-national differences: Denmark, Sweden, and Norway as well as the Netherlands score substantially higher on the second factor (related to non-military security policy) than on the first (military component), whereas Greece and (to a lesser extent) Portugal reach higher values on the first factor which points to a dominance of the military side of foreign and security policy. This may be traced back to the strategic cultures of countries, such as the traditional focus on non-military foreign policy instruments among Scandinavian countries (see Ingebritsen, 2002), or country-specific rivalries, such as in the case of Greece and Turkey. It may also be tied to the ideological dominance of certain parties in the respective governments, for example, among Nordic countries, the dominance of social democratic parties (Wenzelburger & Böller, 2020).
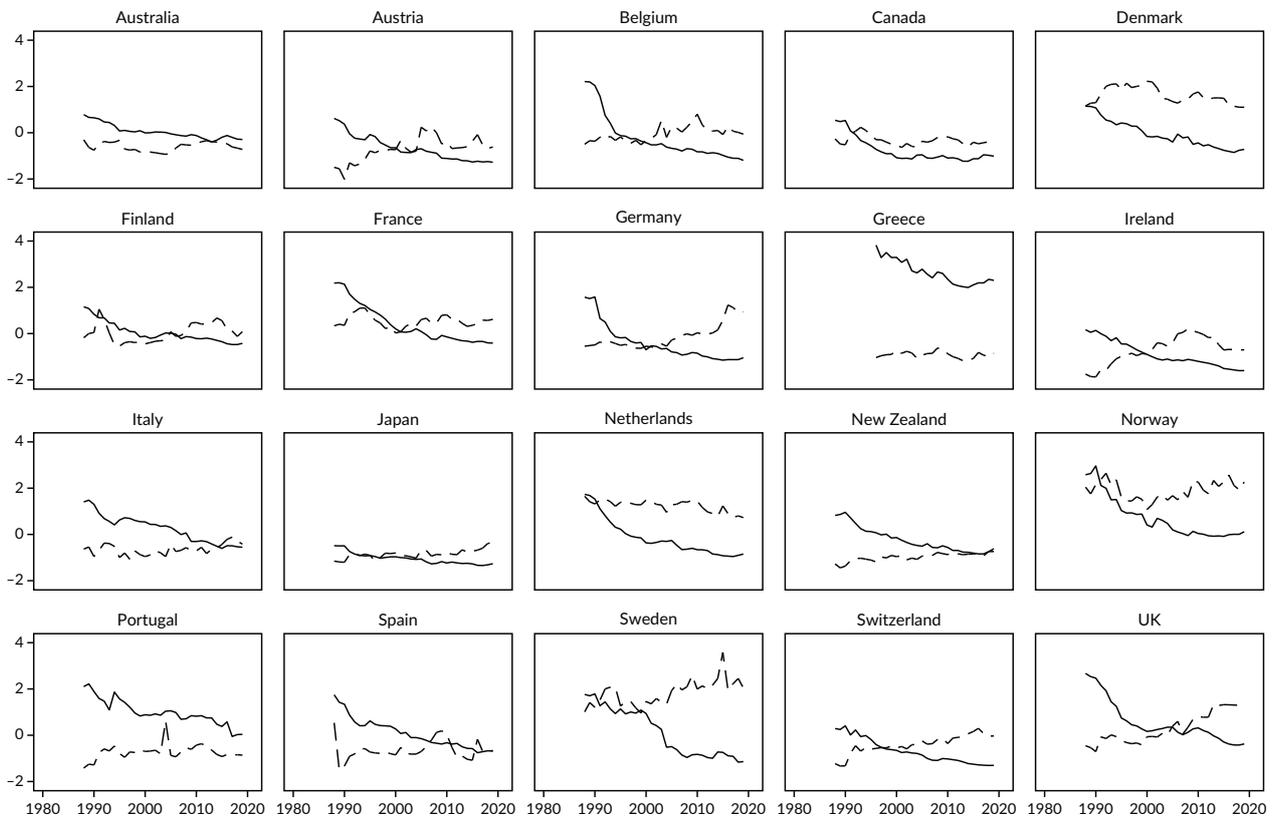
Figure 2. Development of military and non-military components of foreign and security policy. Note: The plain line corresponds to Factor 1 (military) and the dashed line corresponds to Factor 2 (non-military).

3.2. Zooming in on Stick-Slip Dynamics

The first central interest of this article is to identify patterns of continuity and major changes in foreign and security policies during the last 34 years. As previously theorized, public policy approaches, such as PET, argue that policies change only incrementally over longer periods of time before they are punctuated by major reforms (the so-called stick-and-slip dynamics in PET parlance). Hence, theoretically, if we want to focus on major policy changes and analyze why they may occur, first, we have to identify these changes and separate them from the minor incremental adjustments that result from policy-making in subsystems.

A common way to inspect these patterns is to visualize the distribution of the data at hand and to see whether the characteristic pattern of many small adjustments and several large changes emerges. Figure 3 shows that both distributions follow the expected pattern of fat tails, small shoulders, and a high peak which characterizes the distribution of policy change found in many other policy areas. More concretely, we see many incremental adjustments (factor values around 0), a "smaller than normal" number of medium-size changes, but several important and substantial instances of policy change that lie clearly outside the bell curve of the normal distribution.

To get an impression of the size of the "peakedness," PET scholars usually analyze the L-kurtosis, as a kurtosis measure is less influenced by outliers (Breunig & Jones, 2011). Given that a normal distribution has
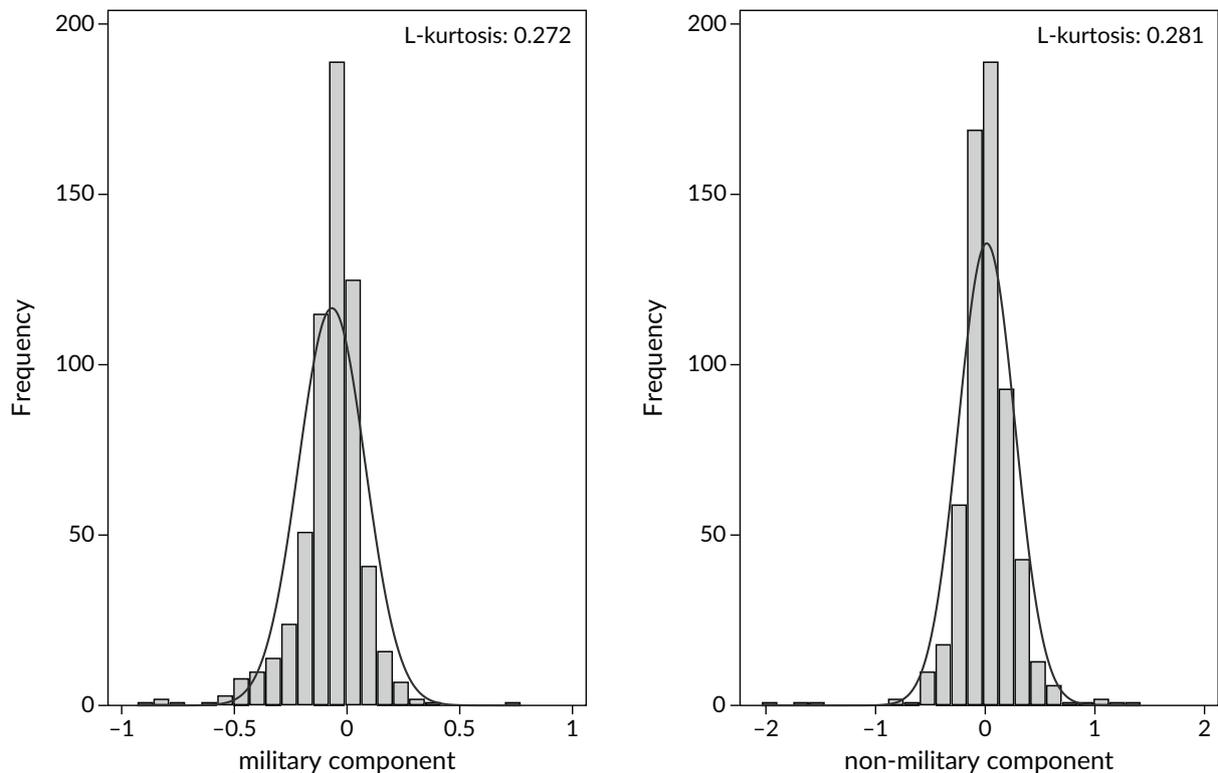
Figure 3. Distribution of foreign and security policy change.

an L-kurtosis of around 0.123, the measures for our two components indicate that foreign and security policies in general seem to follow stick-and-slip dynamics. In fact, the distribution of the military component reaches a value of 0.272 and the non-military component of 0.281, which indicates that the changes are not normally distributed, although they are far from the high L-kurtosis reported, for instance, by Breunig (2006, p. 1078) for public spending (between 0.37 for the UK and 0.49 for the US). Instead, the dynamics of foreign and security policy changes resemble what Brouard et al. (2009, p. 398) have found for legislative activity in a more recent comparative analysis (between, roughly, 0.2 and 0.25). Overall, we can conclude that our analysis of foreign and security policy change broadly resembles the dynamics found in other policy areas and confirms the expectation of Proposition 1, although distributions of public spending change usually show a higher L-kurtosis than we report here (Baumgartner et al., 2009).

4. Explaining Foreign and Security Policy Change

After having assessed the general patterns over time, this section aims to investigate possible associations with changes to foreign and security policies. To do so, we run two sorts of regressions. First, we analyze the annual changes in our two dimensions of foreign and security policy to identify possible general patterns that may explain their development by estimating time-series-cross-section regressions using panel-corrected standard errors to account for heteroskedasticity (Beck & Katz, 1995). We do not include fixed effects as unit heterogeneity is modest due to the use of changes in the factor scores as dependent variables (first differences). Following Proposition 2, we would expect party politics and variables related to the domestic policy process to matter most.

Second, we focus on major changes in the two components to see whether the pattern looks different. We define as major changes all those changes that are higher than one standard deviation from the mean of the respective distribution in a certain country. We additionally differentiate between increases and decreases of the respective policy in the domain (e.g., more/less military spending or armed forces). This leaves us with around 33% of the observations coded as major expansions (for both components) and 5% (military) and 11% (non-military) of observations as major decreases. On this dichotomous dependent variable, we estimate logistic regressions (Y = 0 in country–years without major change, and Y = 1 with major change). As the data varies over time (34 years) and cross-sectionally (20 countries), we follow the proposition developed by Beck et al. (1998) and Beck and Katz (2001) and account for time dependency (serial correlation) by introducing a series of dummies and for heteroscedasticity by using robust standard errors (Huber-White). A possible way of dealing with cross-sectional heterogeneity would be to include unit fixed effects and estimate a conditional logistic regression model (Chamberlain, 1980; Verbeek, 2004). However, Beck and Katz (2001, p. 488) warn that "the use of fixed effects is clearly a bad idea for the binary dependent variable case," which is why we do not estimate a conditional logit model.

To examine Proposition 2, we include several independent variables that can be expected to account for the international and domestic levels—see the Supplementary File for detailed operationalization of the variables and data sources.

To model the impact of factors at the international level, we account for the end of the Cold War as a structural shift, which can be expected to trigger adaptation by states (Volgy & Schwarz, 1994). Moreover, we also include a variable for military alliances (membership in NATO), an indicator that identifies countries with nuclear weapons, and the embeddedness of a country in the international economy (openness of capital markets). Systemic theories of IR, neorealism and institutionalism (in particular, regarding economic interdependences), would expect these factors to matter as they concern states' material capabilities and their positions in the system. As a non-structural external shock at the international level, we account for the years after 9/11 (see Brummer & Oppermann, 2021, p. 317). Clearly, following our theoretical argument derived from PET and Proposition 2, we would expect international factors to be more strongly associated with major security policy change than domestic policy variables.

Regarding domestic factors, we account for economic drivers and inhibitors as well as factors within the political system. These variables follow insights from sub-systemic IR approaches, which highlight the importance of the "second image" in shaping foreign policy decisions (Kaarbo, 2015). In particular, we consider the debt rate and economic growth rate of a country as permissive or constraining factors, as spending on military means, for example, may be restricted in times of fiscal and economic crisis. We also include an indicator for social transfer levels, to gauge the potential "guns vs. butter" trade-off (see Whitten & Williams, 2011). In terms of the political system, we consider the impact of institutional constraints on the ability of governments to implement change, as suggested by both FPA and public policy perspectives (Oppermann & Brummer, 2018; Schmidt, 1996). Moreover, the ideological orientation of the parties in government might affect the foreign policy mix of states and, thus, patterns of change (Hofmann & Martill, 2021), which is why we include the programmatic positions on the military and internationalism. Finally, to capture the effect of leadership change within countries (Gustavsson, 1999), we add a dummy variable for new governments.

Table 2 shows the results of our regression analysis, namely the prediction of positive and negative changes to foreign and security policies on both the military (Models 1–4) and the non-military side (Models 5–7). For each of the components, we first present the results for the general pattern including all annual changes (Models 1, 2, and 5) and then move on to the results for the dichotomized variable of major changes (Models 3–4 and 6–7). To check for overspecification, Model 2 is a more parsimonious model excluding very insignificant variables.

Looking at the military component first, our general expectation that domestic factors are more strongly associated with annual changes, and international forces more strongly with major changes, is reflected in the data. Models 1 and 2, which take up the annual variance of the military factor, include a significant coefficient for the "party politics" variable. Governments with a more pro-military ideology indeed increase this part of security policies—and so does a new government. Similarly, high social transfer seems to limit increases in the military component, indicative of a "guns vs. butter" trade-off. However, the international environment also plays a role, as the years after the end of the Cold War are significantly associated with decreases in the military component, which indicates that countries may indeed have sought to cash in a "peace dividend" after 1991. Another interpretation of this finding is, as indicated above, that states seem to adapt their military components rather incrementally, even in view of systemic reconfigurations, such as the end of the Cold War. The analysis also shows that NATO membership is associated with a decrease in military expenditure, which may reflect that NATO members are particularly open to reducing military capacities due to free-riding on the US (see Kinne & Kang, 2023). Interestingly, open capital markets are associated with a strengthening of the military component, which may indicate that these countries also assume more military responsibility to uphold open trading routes.

The picture changes if we look at major changes only: Most clearly, almost all of the coefficients for the domestic politics variables are no longer significant—neither for major expansions nor for major reductions of the military component. Only institutional constraints seem to limit major increases in the military component. However, apart from the index for the openness of capital markets and NATO membership, no clear-cut picture of a dynamic driven by international factors emerges. Indeed, the finding regarding NATO is most interesting, as it shows that NATO membership may be used by the governments in our sample to decrease their military capacities incrementally (see the negative coefficient in Models 1 and 2), but not drastically (see the negative coefficient for major decreases in Model 7). Additionally, we have to concede that the value of the model for major decreases is somewhat limited, given that some of the interesting variables (e.g., "end of the Cold War" or "time after 9/11") are omitted due to a perfect correlation with the outcome (that is: no major decreases in the years after 9/11, the years after the end of the Cold War, and in countries with nuclear weapons).

In sum, the main takeaway from the analysis of the military component is that while domestic politics seem to be relevant for the general trajectories of foreign and security policies, they are not significantly associated with major changes in these policies. Indeed, these major reversals of policies seem to follow distinct causal dynamics—which cannot be grasped with variables that measure international factors either. This observation hints at the relevance of unique critical junctures, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Whereas the findings for the military part of security policies do at least support Proposition 2 to some extent, the results for the analysis of the non-military component do not point to any particular pattern. Neither do we

Table 2. Results of regression analysis.

	(1) Change in the military component	(2) Change in the military component	(3) Major increase in the military component	(4) Major decrease in the military component	(5) Change in the non-military component	(6) Major increase in the non-military component	(7) Major decrease in the non-military component
Initial level the of military component	−0.0023 (−0.24)	−0.0033 (−0.39)					
Initial level of the non-military component					0.045** (2.48)		
NATO membership	−0.021* (−1.69)	−0.021* (−1.67)	0.46 (1.51)	−1.23*** (−3.31)	−0.027 (−0.93)	−0.22 (−0.95)	−0.085 (−0.32)
Time after 9/11	0.010 (0.40)		−1.35 (−1.28)		0.019 (0.36)	−2.22** (−2.15)	−0.45 (−0.72)
End of the Cold War	−0.091*** (−6.53)	−0.093*** (−6.99)	−0.35 (−1.12)		0.034 (1.27)	−0.30 (−1.23)	0.15 (0.60)
Change of debt ratio	−0.000079 (−0.07)		0.0014 (0.07)	−0.083*** (−3.00)	0.0021 (1.15)	0.046** (2.12)	−0.055* (−1.73)
Economic growth, t--1	−0.0019 (−0.86)		0.091 (1.53)	0.11** (2.12)	0.0022 (0.47)	−0.077 (−1.50)	0.068 (1.38)
Social transfer spending	−0.0024** (−2.04)	−0.0021* (−1.76)	0.0077 (0.17)	−0.036 (−0.72)	−0.0022 (−0.76)	0.021 (0.71)	0.0091 (0.25)
Institutional constraints	0.0012 (0.34)		−0.75*** (−3.28)	0.080 (0.57)	0.016 (1.50)	0.19** (2.02)	−0.40*** (−3.84)
Openness capital markets	0.075* (1.85)	0.077** (1.98)	−7.64*** (−8.94)	5.12*** (2.65)	−0.11 (−1.41)	−1.84*** (−2.65)	−1.87*** (−2.77)
Nuclear weapons	−0.013 (−1.04)		−0.11 (−0.27)	—	0.027 (0.90)	0.43 (1.13)	−0.10 (−0.23)
New government	0.020* (1.69)	0.020* (1.73)	−0.32 (−1.08)	−0.032 (−0.07)	−0.027 (−1.04)	−0.51* (−1.78)	0.14 (0.48)
Military position government	0.0042* (1.89)	0.0042** (1.98)	0.041 (0.51)	0.055 (0.59)			
Internationalist position government					−0.0067* (−1.67)	−0.018 (−0.37)	0.030 (0.62)
Constant	−0.068 (−1.64)	−0.077** (−1.99)	6.40*** (4.72)	−6.40*** (−2.95)	0.12 (1.31)	−0.16 (−0.18)	0.49 (0.56)
(adj.) R²	*0.1368*	*0.1347*	*0.3688*	*0.1488*	*0.0304*	*0.0646*	*0.0879*
N	*598*	*598*	*625*	*333*	*602*	*629*	*625*

Note: Significance levels of * 90%, ** 95%, and *** 99%.

see that domestic factors are related to the general development of non-military foreign and security policies, nor do international events trigger major changes in these policies. If at all, very open capital markets seem to be related to both major decreases and increases in the non-military foreign and security policies—a result which may point to the fact that countries with very open economies may not create insecurity in the markets with abrupt changes of foreign policies. Similarly, countries with many institutional constraints are associated with major increases in non-military spending (and vice versa for decreases and also almost significant for the annual changes in Model 5), a finding that hints at Lijphart's (1999) idea that consensus democracies are "kinder and gentler" (i.e., are more active in non-military foreign and security policies). However, overall, we interpret the unsuspicious findings of the regression as a sign that decisions in non-military foreign and security policies (e.g., membership in an IO) follow dynamics that cannot be well explained by the search for quantitative regularities in data, but may necessitate looking qualitatively at the individual decision-making process, including the effect of perceptions and risk propensity (see Welch, 2005).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In this article we provided a systematic assessment of foreign and security policy change over time, comparing 20 countries between 1988 and 2021. The analysis yields several insights: First, the long-term patterns clearly indicate a stick-and-slip dynamic, as suggested by PET. Foreign and security policies thus resemble other domestic policy fields, with many small adjustments and few major changes. This also highlights the necessity to look beyond instances of radical restructuring, as the majority of the literature on foreign policy change did (see Brummer & Oppermann, 2021, p. 312), and rather confirms earlier studies on inertia and path-dependency in this policy field (Hagan & Rosati, 1994, p. 271). Second, tapping into the sources of change, we find limited support for Proposition 2, which held that major change is related to factors on the international level and states' international position. Domestic factors and institutional constraints seem to play a minor role in triggering substantial policy change, but they do influence policy outputs in general, especially on the military component. The fact that we were not able to detect major shifts in the military and non-military components following the attacks on 9/11, as well as the identified pattern of incremental adjustments after 1991, indicate that major international events and reconfigurations are refracted by states through their political systems, which constrain the scope of policy shifts. However, more research is necessary in this regard given the partially surprising findings in the regression models and limitations given our quantitative research design. In particular, we were not able to capture potentially relevant variables, such as threat perception and public opinion due to limited data availability. The quantitative research design also hampers the ability to assess the role of individual leaders (see Hudson, 2005), the impact of norms and other non-material factors (including collective ideas and narratives, see Krebs, 2015; Legro, 2005), and the effect of idiosyncratic events within specific countries, for example, policy failures (see Kruck et al., 2018; Welch, 2005). Therefore, our article offers a limited "proof of concept" for a quantitative research design to explore patterns of change and continuity in foreign policy among liberal democracies, inspecting long-term trends and correlations, without claiming to detect causal mechanisms.

Nonetheless, in view of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the following foreign policy adaptation in several European states, we contend that our results seem plausible. Overall, Russia's invasion is a prime example of a shock at the international level, which upends the pattern of incremental adjustments of foreign and security policy. This certainly applies to countries, such as Germany, Finland, and Sweden, where

decision-makers responded to the war with major policy changes. In the German case, Chancellor Olaf Scholz swiftly announced policy changes, including the delivery of lethal weapons to a conflict zone and a significant increase in the defense budget. While the "Zeitenwende" decision was a response to an external shock, its implementation followed traditional paths of domestic politics. For example, contested parliamentary debates on the types of military aid to Ukraine revealed persisting partisan differences and bureaucratic hurdles protracted the procurement of new weapons in contrast to the announcement (see Bunde, 2022; Karnitschnig, 2023; Mello, 2024). Unsurprisingly, despite the announcement of a defense budget surge, military expenditures measured in percentage of GDP remained almost unchanged for Germany in 2023 as well as for most NATO member states, with Poland being a notable exception ("Canada's miserly defence spending," 2023).

Similarly, regarding Sweden's and Finland's decision to join NATO—a major foreign policy change following the Russian invasion—it is also evident that external shocks do not result automatically in policy decisions. Rather, notable shifts in public attitudes towards NATO membership in both countries paved the way towards the change in alliance politics (see Kanniainen, 2022). In Sweden, the end of non-alignment was enabled by the reversal of Social Democrats' positioning regarding NATO, while the Greens and the Left continued to oppose the membership application (Aylott & Bolin, 2023). These examples are in line with our overall finding that important external shocks are at least refracted through domestic transmission belts and that systemic events do not determine states' responses.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors have no conflict of interests to report.

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