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**FOLLOW THE LEADER: U.S. HEGEMONIC LEADERSHIP AND THE APPROVAL
OF THE NATO-ASIA-PACIFIC PARTNERSHIP BY CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPEAN COUNTRIES**

BA thesis

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Tartu 2023

Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Word count of the thesis: 15 142

Diana Stepanova, date 18.05.2024

Abstract

NATO's recent partnership expansion into the Indo-Pacific region came as a surprise in the sense that it implies a strategic opening that is not easily explained considering the strategic preferences of CEE countries and their interest in keeping the strategic focus of NATO in Europe. Despite this, these countries approved the partnership framework. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate why CEE countries supported NATO's initiative.

This thesis aims to determine the reasons for CEE countries' approval of NATO's shift towards strategic opening towards Asia. To answer this question, the thesis relies on the realist literature on hegemonic leadership within alliances, from which it derives the hypothesis that smaller allies are willing to agree to alliance strategies that are not in their direct interest if there is hegemonic leadership in the context of strategic choices. In the studied case this means that U.S. hegemony inside NATO might account for why CEE states approved the partnership although it contradicts their strategic interest in NATO focusing on Europe. To empirically test this explanation in the context of the CEE approval of NATO's adoption of the Asia-Pacific partnership, a qualitative content analysis was conducted using strategic concepts, statements, interviews, and press releases of policymakers regarding the approval of the partnership framework and the U.S. role in the approval process in three selected CEE countries - Estonia, Poland, and Hungary.

The analyses revealed that Estonia, Poland, and Hungary approved the strategic opening of NATO towards Asia-Pacific and the presence of U.S. hegemonic influence that is seen in considerations and accommodations of U.S. interests, following them, and keeping the US involved in their defense, in the calculations of Estonia and Poland. However, the analysis revealed that the Hungarian example showed that there was no US hegemonic influence. Still, there was Chinese influence in the calculations of strategic choices, therefore suggesting that this topic needs further investigation. However, this cannot be considered a hegemonic influence, since it did not involve intra-alliance dynamics due to the absence of China in NATO. I conclude that hegemonic influence could explain the approval of alliance strategies by small countries that are not in their direct interest.

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Introduction

Alliances have become a crucial tool for countries to protect their external border and position on the international political stage. There are many arguments and approaches as to why alliances are formed, collapsed, or endured. According to the realist theory predominant in international relations, alliances are formed out of necessity when a country cannot independently maintain its security (Walt 1979: 118). However, joining an alliance may also put a country's freedom of action at risk when states can find themselves entrapped in a conflict or abandoned. In line with realist logic, NATO, being a formal and defensive alliance, is expected to expand its focus or enlarge only if it is deemed necessary and effective for all allies.

NATO aims to ensure the freedom and security of its members by promoting democratic values and cooperation on security-related issues and this goal is achieved through political and military means (The North Atlantic Treaty 1949). At the core of NATO lies a collective defense principle, which is outlined in Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty and states that any attack on one or more members is considered an attack on all members, and the organization will respond accordingly (*ibid.*). To invoke crisis-management operation under Article 5 or a United Nations mandate or to take any other NATO decision the unanimous agreement of all member countries is needed. It means that NATO is aimed at fulfilling its goal and securing its borders from potential threats.

It is important to highlight that NATO is an alliance of the North Atlantic region meaning that NATO is aimed at securing this region and only any other European state can become a member of the alliance (The North Atlantic Treaty 1949). A state located out of the region may only become a partner. NATO is one of the organizations that has formed strong ties with non-member states. Partners of NATO include a variety of states, such as countries of the Middle East region, as well as South America and the Asia-Pacific region. The partnership framework marks a shift from NATO's traditional focus on safeguarding only the members' borders region to addressing global security challenges. Since all NATO decisions are made unanimously, this strategic opening also means that all allies agree to expand the alliance's strategic engagements beyond its borders.

After the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine, NATO has decided to strengthen its global cooperation with like-minded partners to defend the rules-based international order and establish international norms and standards. NATO has also stressed the importance of engagement with

the Asia-Pacific region. The appearance of the Asia-Pacific region was attached to the belief that the Euro-Atlantic area and Pacific Ocean regions are interconnected and, therefore must remain united and firm while dealing with China which NATO sees as a challenge (NATO 2022: 4-5). However, there is still criticism over the need for this expansion due to the absence of a direct impact on European security since none of the European allies shares a border with any Asian state. Because of this, it is unlikely that NATO will transform itself into a global alliance committed to the military defense of Asian partners. Different priorities within the alliance also become a problem in approving the partnership. Many NATO members prioritize Euro-Atlantic security since the goal of the alliance aligns with their national security concerns. For example, Central and Eastern European states (or CEE) primarily focused on the Russian threat. However, despite those counters, CEE members have agreed to the partnership during the 2022 Madrid Summit, even though this approval could potentially weaken the strategic focus on Europe by adding the strategic concern with Asia.

While strategic cooperation does not equate to the enlargement of the alliance, the principal challenges – and why states tend to be reluctant to widen the scope of an alliance – can be seen in debates over NATO enlargement. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO has expanded its focus by engaging with ex-Communist states and building a global partnership framework. During each step of transforming itself, the developments were highly scrutinized by member countries due to the existing shift of focus of the alliance. For instance, during the early 1990s, some NATO members were hesitant to expand the alliance, preferring to consider other types of security partnerships with newly independent states. There were concerns about the political and economic costs of expansion, and some policymakers believed that expansion was impossible due to agreements with the Soviet Union (Rauchhaus 2007: 175). The United States was the driving force behind the push to expand NATO into Central and Eastern Europe, with Germany being the only European ally that supported the policy from the start, albeit moderately (*ibid.*: 174). Despite opposition, the US determined the details of the expansion, including which countries would be admitted and when (*ibid.*), by gaining control over the future of the alliance. This shows that usually at the beginning of any expansion of focus of an alliance, some alliance members are reluctant to take on additional obligations, therefore a dominant ally may influence other members' choices.

As already mentioned, NATO's recent expansion of partnership into the Asia-Pacific region has caused tensions with many European states, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe, due to different security priorities. These tensions are noteworthy given that many CEE states rely heavily on NATO due to its traditional focus on deterring Russia. As such, the decision by CEE countries to support NATO's initiative requires further investigation. There is currently no existing research on CEE approval of NATO's Asian partnership, therefore this thesis will be among the first to aim at studying reasons for CEE countries' strategic choices in the context of Asian partnership. The thesis is focused on studying CEE countries since those believed more dependent on NATO's and great powers' security guarantee.

Considering the role of the U.S. in strategic decisions of NATO such as enlargement, the hegemonic leadership is considered to explain the approval of the CEE states. Hegemonic leadership influence here is the best explanatory factor. It suggests that if the partnership goes beyond conventional geographical theatre, European allies are unlikely to support this expansion because the Asian region is located beyond the North Atlantic security region's borders. Hegemonic leadership, however, may give an insight into whether external influencers drove the decision to support the expansion of strategic focus. The case of the Asian cooperation cannot be easily explained due to limited studies studying the case from different points of view. Hence it provides grounds to find out whether hegemonic leadership can explain this approval from CEE countries' points of view. Therefore, a researched question states: "What explains CEE countries' approval of NATO's strategic opening towards NATO-Asian Pacific cooperation?" Based on the mentioned past transformations of NATO and the role of the U.S. during them, the thesis hypothesizes that if hegemonic leadership exists in the context of strategic choices, then smaller allies are willing to agree to alliance strategies that are not in their direct interest. In the case of this thesis for the NATO-Asia-Pacific partnership, this means that U.S. hegemony inside NATO might account for why CEE states approved the partnership although it contradicts their strategic interest in NATO focusing on Europe.

This thesis aims to explore the factors that contributed to the approval of NATO partnership with Asia-Pacific states by CEE countries based mainly on the presence of U.S. hegemonic influence in the strategic calculations of the CEE countries, but also on the strategic interest of the states. The study focuses on the subset of NATO members in the CEE region, because of their vested

interest in NATO's focus on Europe and, therefore, enabling it to trace the influence of hegemonic leadership most visibly.

To empirically demonstrate the role of the U.S. in the strategic calculations of the CEE countries, the study analyzes strategic concepts and statements, interviews, and speeches held by policymakers in three CEE countries – Estonia, Poland, and Hungary. Those sources were chosen due to their ability to create a representative sample of public opinion of CEE countries' policymakers, while countries are selected considering their size, location on the NATO map, relationship with Russia (NATO's direct threat), and reliance on the NATO pillar in their defense and security politics. In the methodological part, an expanded explanation of case selection is introduced. In the thesis "NATO-AP4 cooperation" and "NATO - Asia-Pacific partnership" are used interchangeably.

In the next part will be presented a theoretical framework that would give a basis for a comprehensive understanding of potential motivational factors and their impact on the approval of the researched countries. The theoretical part argues that hegemonic leadership in an alliance can result in decisions by smaller states in the alliance to change the strategic direction of the alliance in a way that differs from the initial strategic focus. The theoretical part will contain alliance formation theories, intra-alliance dynamics, alliance choices determinants as well as the role of hegemonic leadership in the alliance. The theoretical part is mainly based on the works of Stephen Walt, and Glenn Snyder as well as other important works done on the research of the alliances and hegemonic leadership with them, which also are based on Walt's and Snyder's ideas. Afterwards, the methodology will be introduced. Approval of the partnership emanates from hegemonic leadership exercised by the US. Therefore, the empirical part will explore the connection between approval and hegemonic influence, however, also considering factors such as CEE countries' strategic interests in NATO and Asia, behavior, and strategic relations with Asian partners, and most importantly, the presence of hegemonic leadership in those factors. Before the conclusion will be introduced a general overview of findings. In conclusion, an answer to the research question will be provided as well as the limitations of the thesis that may provide a basis for further research will be introduced.

1. Theoretical framework: Alliances and the decision to expand the strategic focus

The theoretical framework is interested in finding the answer to the question of why states within an alliance agree to the expansion of the strategic focus of the alliance in circumstances when such a decision risk impeding their initial interests in joining the alliance in the first place. To explain the researched phenomenon, the study introduces the concept of “hegemonic leadership” and how hegemonic leadership in an alliance can result in decisions by smaller states in the alliance to change the strategic direction of the alliance in a way that differs from the initial strategic focus. The expected theoretical answer relies on the argument that U.S. hegemonic leadership within NATO influences small-state members’ behavior (Cesa 1999: 15).

1.1. Alliance formation and Alliance theories

To understand the meaning of strategic focus expansion, the definition of an alliance should be introduced. The alliance is a phenomenon within the realm of international relations and security. While various approaches exist for defining alliance, the thesis adopts the realist definition of Stephen Walt (1987: 1), who characterizes an alliance as a “formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states.” The primary objective of most alliances is to merge the capabilities of their members in a manner that advances their national interests (Walt 1997: 157). It is widely acknowledged that states predominantly employ alliance agreements as instruments to prepare and coordinate in anticipation of war or conflict, to bolster their collective military capability (Johnson 2017: 736; Snyder 1997: 4; Walt 1997: 157). Therefore, in the event of expansion of the focus of the alliance, there is a risk of alliances’ shift from the original purpose.

Studying the strategic focus shifts first alliance formations should be explained. Alliance formations matter in this case because they highlight the initial interests that states have when joining the alliance. This therefore might then be contradicted by the strategic decisions to expand the geographic focus. Alliances are formed based on the threats experienced by states. These threats can be categorized as internal or external, with the latter being particularly relevant to alliance formation whereas most alliances are concerned with external threats. An external threat arises when a potential challenger indicates a willingness to go to war unless the existing status

quo is revised in its favor (Johnson 2017: 738). Therefore, as the probability of the adversary's success increases, the target state is more inclined to the ally to secure itself.

There are two primary paths for forming alliances in response to external threats: balancing and bandwagoning. Balancing hypotheses posit that the greater the threatening state's aggregation of power, offensive capabilities, and perceived aggressiveness is, the higher the likelihood that other states will align against it (Walt 1987: 32). Contrarily, bandwagoning hypotheses propose the opposite dynamics – the greater a state's aggregation of power, offensive capabilities, perceived aggressiveness, and proximity is, the more likely the other states are to align with it (*ibid.*). An alliance may also be formed as symmetrical when all states have equal capabilities or asymmetrical when all are different. Alliances, however, are more likely to persist when there is an asymmetry of power within them (Walt 1997: 157, 170). The most extreme form of an asymmetrical alliance is the existence of a security guarantee when a great power agrees to protect smaller ones and does not expect the same from them (*ibid.*: 174). This can be seen in the case of NATO and particularly in the example of the Central-Eastern European states that have joined the alliance to both benefit from greater state protection as well as due to perceptions of threat coming from Russia.

Three main theories can help to explain alliance formation from different theoretical approaches – realism, institutionalism, and constructivism. The following study relies on realism, because of its predominance in studying alliances, its coincidence with the purpose of alliances as well as reasons for CEE states to join NATO, in balancing threats. Institutionalism and constructivism are also taken into consideration since institutionalism views alliances as instruments of “intra-alliance management” and constructivism explains how ideas are shaped within alliances.

Realism suggests that great powers must primarily rely on themselves. The thesis relies on the realist approach, because of its similarity to NATO's main purpose – the collective defense of allies (NATO 2022: 4). According to realism, military power is crucial, and states often form alliances to pool and strengthen their resources against a common enemy (Walt 1987: 18). The balance of power theory, which is fundamental to realism, suggests that states join forces to prevent stronger powers from dominating them (*ibid.*). This viewpoint implies that states form alliances as a defensive measure, seeking protection from potential threats. However, the balance of threat theory introduces another perspective, asserting that states form alliances to counter specific threats rather than pure power (*ibid.*). In this context, ideology holds less sway as a motivator for

alignment. The idea of mutual control among allied states is also crucial in realism. In essence, realism posits that alliances not only serve as mechanisms for collective defense against external threats but also involve an inherent dynamic of mutual interminable influence among allied states (Locatelli & Tesoni 2009: 346). Concluding this, realism states that generally alliances are formed to protect themselves, maintain the balance of power by being temporary, and are a tool for greater states to exert hegemonic control over other allies. Realism also introduces the idea that states enter alliances based on their national interests.

Though institutionalism and constructivism are not the prime theories used in this thesis, they also may explain intra-alliance dynamics. Institutionalism for instance provides insights into how international institutions influence cooperation and conflict resolution. According to this theory alliances shape actor behavior in ways that cannot be fully explained by the constellations of power and preferences from which they may have originated, therefore alliances are tools for the redistribution of power and changing actor preferences over time (Schimmelfennig 2015: 3). Constructivism however focuses on the significance of shared ideas in understanding international cooperation, therefore challenges the conventional focus on material power dynamics by highlighting the role of shared social constructs in shaping international relations (Wendt 1999: 225-237).

Alliance formation is relevant for understanding intra-alliance politics and dynamics since it explains why states join an alliance and what they are interested in. As realism suggests, generally alliances are formed and joined out of the need for protection and balancing of power. In the researched context alliance formation means that allies are interested in NATO to protect themselves while NATO may be a tool for hegemonic influence over small allies that seek protection from NATO.

1.2. Alliance choices

Part of the research is to find the factors of approval of strategic decisions that explain why the states choose over the initial interests. The approval may be influenced by the initial purpose of the alliance may influence the strategic interest of the members, also intra-alliance dynamics that have an impact on what kind of options allies have, and the presence of influence on the alliance.

Allies' strategic choices create a continuous flow of behavioral evidence, which is evaluated with general situational factors to determine the likely outcomes of current options.

One important element is the mutual dependence of partners which includes the state's need for assistance in a conflict, the partner's ability to provide that assistance, and the availability of realignment alternatives (Snyder 1984: 472). This may be seen when one state relies on the ally's readiness to help in the escalation of the war that is fixed in agreements or treaties among the states. Another determinant is the degree of strategic interest that parties have in defending each other, specifically in preventing opponents from gaining access to the ally's power resources (*ibid.*). This is seen in shared common goals or values when both states share a common adversary or support each other since understanding the meaning of the threat might be experienced and its impact. The third determinant is a degree of explicitness which may mitigate concerns such as fears of abandonment though it does not eliminate them (*ibid.*). In practice this might be seen when allies are entrapped in the conflict, they may find it easier to dissociate themselves from the ally who entrapped them or may find it necessary to stand by the ally to prove their loyalty. These factors shape the values and likelihoods attributed to potential consequences of strategic choices. A strategic decision like the strategic opening towards Asia means that it might shape the overall readiness of the alliance to be for Asian partners in the event of an escalation or perhaps expose the distinction between allies' commitment to the alliance and their national interests.

All mentioned determinants are intertwined with the topic of approval of the strategic focus shift and suggest that allies are influenced by their dependence on others and strategic interests in defending others. According to this logic, the dependence of smaller allies in NATO reflects in readiness to support other allies, the strategic interest of small allies indicates whether the options they are given are against their interests, and behavior and explicitness support two previous factors.

1.3. Intra-alliance politics

Above mentioned determinants, mainly dependence and strategic interests, explain intra-alliance dynamics that interpret the decision-making process and what kind of struggles might appear. Studied in the thesis strategic decisions of the alliance's focus is an example of intra-alliance politics. Glenn Snyder's alliance security dilemma is the most suitable concept to explain the

dynamics within an alliance and understand the risks allies take if the alliance expands its focus. This dilemma involves a trade-off between the fear of abandonment and entrapment among the members of the alliance (Snyder 1984: 466). These two dynamics matter in studying the strategic decisions of allies since they can enter the calculations of states when deciding upon the shift of the strategic focus of an alliance.

According to Snyder (1984: 466), abandonment is a type of defection that is manifested in various ways: an ally may realign with the opponent, de-align by abrogating the alliance contract, fail to fulfill explicit commitments, or neglect to provide expected support in contingencies. In Snyder's context, abandonment refers to the fear that an ally may defect or align with the adversary if doubts arise regarding the capacity or willingness to defend. It means that if the alliance chooses to shift its strategic focus, the allies with smaller power may lose their security guarantee due to this shift in priorities. Conversely, entrapment means when a state is dragged into a conflict over an ally's interest that is either not shared or shared only partially (*ibid.*: 467). Entrapment occurs when one believes that the preservation of the alliance is valued more than the cost of fighting for the ally's interests (*ibid.*). This means that if the alliance chooses to shift its strategic focus to another region and if any kind of escalation takes place in that region and a strong ally is involved in it then all the other allies that are not connected to the region directly may be involved in solving problems of this region. The dilemma extends beyond deciding whether to support or restrain the ally since it also involves the choice between supporting the ally or collaborating with a non-involved state on the opposing side.

The risks of abandonment and entrapment are inversely related, meaning that reducing one can increase the other. When a state provides a strong and supportive commitment to an ally, it can reassure them and reduce the risk of abandonment by enhancing its reputation (Snyder 1984: 468). Conversely, if a state weakens its commitment and withholds support, it can decrease the risk of entrapment, enhance bargaining power over the ally, preserve the option for realignment, but increase the risk of abandonment and diminish the reputation for loyalty (*ibid.*). Therefore, if an alliance decides to collaborate with non-members, it, potentially, puts at risk both the security of allies and its original purpose. Also, considering that alliances consist of both powerful and smaller states, the latter might be particularly vulnerable to this kind of dynamics, since are more likely to be affected by intra-alliance politics in their own decisions, including those decisions on the strategic directions of the alliance.

Summing up two previous chapters and considering both the determinants and intra-alliance politics that expose the importance of a great power role in the alliance choices, dependence on someone's support and assistance becomes a critical feature. This factor is a constellation in which one ally is by far more powerful than the other and exerts hegemonic influence. This provides a possibility to take a more specific look inside an asymmetric alliance, where the great power has a bigger role in the decision-making process to understand its impact on allies' choices.

1.4. Hegemonic leadership in the Alliance

The term "hegemony" stems from the Greek word *ἡγεμονία* (*hēgemonía*), which means power supremacy and dominance (Oxford English Dictionary 2014). Therefore, a hegemon is a leader or dominant figure possessing the most power. In the context of international relations, hegemony is often defined as the domination of one state over others (Cox 1993: 264).

When considering the existence of symmetric and asymmetric alliances, it becomes clear that hegemons are those possessing greater power and therefore being less dependent on others. One characteristic that distinguishes them from others is their use of overall power to influence outcomes on various issues, even if the interests of others are taken into consideration (Keohane & Nye 1989: 31; Chomsky 2004: 6-7; Cesa 1999: 5). It's essential to note that in the realm of alliances, the hegemon is the one who offers protection to smaller, weaker, or more dependent states in exchange for their obedience. These states obey insofar as it aligns with their security needs (Cesa 1999: 12). Therefore, hegemony is most easily exercised against relatively weak states or those without the same capabilities as the hegemon (Walt 1997: 165).

According to the realist approach, hegemonic leadership aims to maintain the hegemon's position in the established system rather than challenging it (Walt 1997: 164). This control over other states can provide the hegemon with strategic advantages and a leading position in political affairs. However, it also requires a strong commitment to preserving the relationships built with allies and the willingness to expend the effort needed to keep them in line (*ibid.*). An opportunity to control allies also suggests that hegemonic leadership is most likely to exist in the case of asymmetry of power. Hegemon can also make itself involved in different regional issues, even if it can remain neutral if the issue may be of interest but does not have a direct impact on it (*ibid.*: 165; Press-Barnathan 2006: 276). Nonetheless, a hegemon is least likely to stay neutral in such situations.

It is worth noting that this leadership style tends to be exercised against relatively weaker states (Walt 1997: 165). If a state perceives a high level of dependence on its ally, believes that the ally is less dependent, encounters vagueness in alliance commitments, or observes doubtful loyalty in the ally's recent behavior, it is likely to fear abandonment more than entrapment (Snyder 1984: 475). In the case of NATO, this leadership can be seen when most of the states follow the U.S. as a leader in missions or strategic decisions. Therefore, the hegemonic leader holds significant influence over the commitment behavior by becoming a condition that causes other allies to an alliance decision that may counter their interests since it reduces the benefit these allies may receive from being in the alliance.

1.5. Small states in the Alliance

Central and Eastern European states in comparison to great powers such as the U.S. are vulnerable to their perceived threat due to small political power in international politics as well as due to their size, such as their reliance on foreign markets, trade, or political changes abroad (Vaicekauskaitė 2017: 11). To prevent isolation that can harm the well-being of small states, social and cultural relationships with the outside world are essential. Addressing the complexity of security challenges requires small states to possess diverse capabilities, necessitating engagement with various actors and security providers to mitigate risks. However, in exchange for protection, larger powers may restrict the political maneuverability of small states or exert additional pressure by intervening in their domestic or foreign affairs. For small states, the cost of dependency is viewed as an inevitable expense enabling them to derive benefits from bilateral and multilateral relations with more formidable powers (Pederson 2023: 442).

According to the alliance shelter theory, small states join alliances to maintain sovereignty and control while benefiting from cooperation with greater powers. Alliance shelter theory suggests that shelters are established in asymmetric bilateral relations with a stronger state or multilateral organization providing the shelter (Bailes & Bradley 2016: 4). Small states that are in a weaker position seek shelter to enhance their political, economic, and societal resilience and leverage power distribution to their advantage (Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2017: 26; Pederson 2023: 444). The alliance shelter theory rejects the idea that small states seek protection solely due to a capability disparity with larger neighbors. Instead, it contends that small states operate under a different logic, emphasizing the uniqueness of their social units (Bailes & Bradley 2016: 5). Alliance shelter

theory acknowledges that seeking shelter may come at a substantial cost for small states, even if the direct threat from larger states is distant (Vaicekauskaitė 2017: 12). The decision to pursue shelter transforms society, influencing its dynamics, even in the absence of a direct threat to sovereignty. By transforming itself while integrating into the alliance, it might change strategic interests due to the influence of other members.

By summing up the theoretical part it can be stated that it is counter-intuitive for an alliance to approve initiatives that contradict with their original interests in the alliance. The hegemon in the alliance has a big role in both alliance formation and endurance. They also tend to influence the behavior of other allies. Therefore, it is possible to state, that if there is a hegemonic leadership then dependent states take into consideration the interests of the hegemon when deciding on the strategic focus of the alliance, even if they decide on topics that are contrary to their initial interests.

2. Methodology

The following chapter will outline the research design, case selection, timeframe, reflection upon the chosen data, and analysis methods. A further explanation of the procedure of analysis is also introduced.

2.1. Research design and case selection

While studying strategic decisions regarding the approval of the strategic opening of the alliance, a case study could be chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. There are two main ways to conduct a case study, one is by using a single case study, and another one is by using multiple case studies. For this thesis, a single case study was chosen. A single case study can be defined as a study about a group of units in the context of this thesis, that is aimed to generalize several units (Gustafson 2017: 2). A single case study was chosen over multiple case studies due to the goal of the study which is to study a sample of states with similar foreign political views and a possibility to describe the phenomenon (Siggelkow 2007: 21). By using a single-case study in studying CEE countries' approval of expanding NATO's strategic focus, it will be possible to explore the new phenomenon and test whether old theoretical concepts of realistic approaches to allies' strategic choices are still present.

The thesis will study a sample of states within an alliance approving a strategic decision to expand the strategic focus of the alliance that is contrary to their initial interests. For that, the current NATO partnership with Asia-Pacific 4 states (or NATO-AP4 cooperation) and the Central Eastern European (or CEE) states' approval in the period of 5 years or from 2019 to 2024 will be approached. The case was selected due to non-existent before research on this case, though having a basis for the puzzle due to the existence of other comparable cases of NATO allies agreeing to the expansion of the focus of the alliance like Western European states' approval of East Germany's entry into NATO as well as the inclusion of CEE states in NATO and approvals of NATO's "out of area" peacekeeping missions. The CEE countries' case is particularly insightful due to its uniqueness in the current geopolitical situation when CEE countries are securing themselves due to the escalation of the perceived threat coming from Russia. The case is also puzzling due to the studied phenomenon which is the approval of the deepening of the partnership

with the Asian region, which is much further located from Europe, and has an uncertain impact on European security theatre.

CEE countries were selected due to their active role during NATO's initiatives to prove to be worth defending. CEE countries supported NATO's Article 5 in response to the September 11 attacks and the United States against Saddam Hussein's regime (Marton & Eichler 2013: 351). They also backed NATO's action in enforcing UN Security Council Resolution 1973 against Muammar Gaddafi's regime (*ibid.*). CEE countries were involved in two of these foreign missions (Afghanistan and Iraq) because of their deep ties to Western political-economic structures, without direct security interests compelling them to do so, but not without normative convictions regarding what was seen by them as virtues of the two missions (*ibid.*: 352, 359-361). However, in Libya, they were reluctant to join the Western intervention (*ibid.*). It shows that CEE states may not appreciate ally perseverance in foreign missions where the US plays a secondary role or no role at all in initiating or leading the mission like in the case of Libya (*ibid.*: 357). This also provides a basis that hegemonic leadership may have a role in the calculations of CEE countries over strategic decisions.

Since the CEE region contains a variety of countries, for the thesis only three were chosen – Estonia, Poland, and Hungary – that provide a representative sample of Central Eastern European states. Accordingly, Estonia is included due to its small size (45,335 km²), geographical location (located in the Northern Eastern bloc of NATO, bordering with Russia on the East), the significance of the NATO pillar in national security (third pillar of Estonian defense politics that lies in the importance of international cooperation), its not friendly relations with the Russian Federation, which underscore its national security dependence on NATO. Poland is selected due to its considerable size (312, 696 km²), geographical location (Central Eastern bloc of NATO and border with Russia (Kaliningrad) and Belarus), the not friendly relations with Russia and Belarus, the significance of NATO in the defense field. Lastly, Hungary is included because of its moderate size (93,030 km²), its geographical location (the South of the NATO Eastern bloc, bordering with Ukraine), the importance of the NATO pillar in its defense, and its friendly ties with China and Russia. In aspect of size Estonia and Poland are the opposites, while Hungary is placed between them. Considering the geographical location, the states are located at the Northern, Central, and Southern Eastern borders of NATO, while giving an aspect of different perception of the threat.

Considering the NATO pillar, all three states are similarly close to each other, meaning that NATO plays a big role in providing a security guarantee. Considering the relationships with NATO's adversary (Russia), Estonia and Poland are placed in one extreme of having relatively cold relations, while Hungary is on the other side with warmer relations. Together it provides a representative sample of CEE states.

2.2. Method of analysis

To answer the question will be used qualitative analysis to explore the approval of NATO – AP4 cooperation by CEE countries and the U.S. role in this approval. Qualitative analysis is chosen as the preferred method, given that all used statements and policy documents serve as the primary sources of information regarding countries' approval. The selected research design involves a single-case study that explores the approval of CEE countries of Asia-Pacific cooperation within NATO. A content analysis will be used as a method to address the research question and find the connection between approval and influence. Content analysis is a “technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti 1969: 14). It is used to analyze the content, themes, patterns, and structure of forms of communication and therefore move from the text to the answers to the research question (White & Marsh 2006: 27). The goal of the qualitative content analysis in this thesis is to examine the statements of policymakers to find the role played by U.S. hegemonic leadership in the approval of the partnership framework.

To answer the question, the analysis will be divided into two parts. Firstly, the phenomenon of the NATO-AP4 partnership framework will be explained. Afterward will be explored the approval of the partnership by analyzing whether the states explicitly approved the partnership framework expansion between 2019 and 2024. For this information will be examined statements and speeches made from 2019 to 2024 during bilateral and multilateral meetings involving the CEE countries' Prime Ministers, Presidents, Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs as well as ambassadors. Official statements, speeches, and other official documents are chosen due to the aim of creating a descriptive image of the researched case. Additional data will be gathered from reputable news sources if the governmental websites will not provide any relevant information regarding the approval of the partnership or the presence of hegemonic influence. The 2019-2024 frame was chosen due to changes in the relations of NATO and Asian states that deepened the relationship during

this time. If the analysis in the first part shows the approval and it is supported by policymakers' statements, there is also a readiness to build strong strategic relations or deal with potential security issues, it will implicitly mean the approval of the partnership. If the first part shows that the U.S. is also mentioned during this meeting or is important, then it would provide a basis that there might be a hegemonic influence in the approval of the partnership. This will help to contextualize the decision and to provide insights into the public explanations by Estonia, Poland, and Hungary, and how they portray AP4 cooperation.

Since the central explanatory factor of interest in the thesis is a sign of hegemonic influence, the second part will examine the presence or absence of hegemonic influence. Other factors that are prominently highlighted will be recorded too, to control whether something else played a crucial role. A hegemonic influence will be analyzed by measuring the initial interests of the researched states together with the role they assign to the U.S., and, therefore, willingness to accommodate US concerns. When initial interest shows that the state was willing to gain a security guarantee from the greater powers and states are willing to accommodate U.S. interests for this purpose, even to the extent of undermining their initial interests, then there is hegemonic leadership. If the U.S. is seen as not central to realizing these interests, then there is no U.S. hegemonic leadership, but there could be hegemonic leadership of another state. If the initial interest is different from the security guarantee gain and the U.S. role in achieving this goal is still seen as central, there is the presence of the U.S. hegemonic leadership. In turn, there is no hegemonic leadership when the role of the U.S. is seen as not central. Having information on the role of the U.S. in foreign political strategic decisions will provide insights into why CEE countries support their wishes.

To conduct the research, firstly data that includes "meaningful matter" (Krippendorff 2004: 18) will be selected. The main criteria for defining useful data are cohesion, coherence, acceptability, and informativity (White & Marsh 2006: 27). Therefore, Estonian, Polish, and Hungarian policymakers' speeches, interviews, and other statements that are credible will be searched. Accordingly, this data will be obtained from the NATO website archives, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Prime Minister and President cabinets' websites as well as from embassy websites and trustworthy news portals and examined critically. Speeches, interviews, and press releases will be selected that mention topics of NATO-AP4 partnership framework, NATO

membership, those that mention the role of the U.S., as well as those that mention Estonia's, Poland's, and Hungary's strategic relations with Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand both on bilateral and NATO level. After explaining the phenomenon, the analysis will be divided into two parts – the presence/absence of approval and then of hegemonic influence. Afterward will be introduced other relevant findings. Before conducting the analysis, coding categories and codes will be defined. Each part would focus on its main goal and have its list of code categories, relevant to the purpose of the analysis. Before that pilot test based on 10 documents from three countries is conducted to see whether the codes work for the research and any generalization. All the codes will be based on information gained in a theoretical framework and information about the phenomenon of cooperation and explained below.

To examine hegemonic leadership, firstly NATO accession speeches of three countries will be observed. Speeches will be obtained from the official NATO website archive. Based on them and security concepts (starting from the year of accession to NATO to the latest update of the concept), will be outlined initial interest in NATO and expectations from NATO. Data for this part will be sourced from the respective Ministry of Defense or Foreign Affairs websites of the three states. This information will help to understand countries' preferences within an alliance, how they make alliance choices, and to which extent they are dependent on the hegemon and committed to him.

For both parts of the analysis will be used 125 documents obtained from NATO archives, governmental websites, national broadcaster websites, as well as from the websites of the embassies of Estonia, Hungary, Poland in Japan, South Korea, the United States, and the Embassies of Japan, South Korea. After the coding process, all the information will be analyzed and put together to see a broad picture of each state's behavior behind the approval. Then the results will be interpreted and explained. In Conclusion, the study will determine whether hegemonic leadership exercised by the US and the way it echoes the strategic decisions of the CEE states, explains their decision to support the expansion of the strategic focus of the alliance to Asia, and whether other determinants can explain the approval.

Content analysis will be employed as a research tool, utilizing MAXQDA software. The analysis will involve the identification of key factors related to the topic of approval of AP4 cooperation within the provided qualitative data. For studying approval of the partnership following codes will

be Used: support for cooperation, strategic interest in the region, present strategic relations with Asian partners, shared values with Asian partners, shared goals with Asian partners, shared threats with Asian partners, and relations with Asian partners. For exploring hegemonic leadership following codes will be Used: the role of the U.S. in politics, the US military presence in the country, support for the US's goals, security guarantee offers, initial interest in NATO, interest in US power, dependence on the US, relations with the US. In the appearance of any other relevant to the topic codes, that might explain the presence/absence of hegemonic leadership, will be used for further analysis. Potential challenges during data collection may arise from language barriers. To address this, information will be sourced from reliable websites, including official broadcasters and other European broadcasters in English, if the information on the governmental website is provided only in the national language.

3. Explaining CEE approval of NATO's strategic opening of strategic focus to Asia

The following chapters will provide the results of the analysis and explain the phenomenon and approval of Estonia, Poland, and Hungary of the NATO – Asian Pacific Partnership framework.

3.1. Description of the NATO Partnership Framework

In the post-Cold War era, NATO proactively transformed itself by doubling its membership, adapting to new global challenges, engaging in peacekeeping operations, and establishing special relationships with organizations such as the EU. Many states wanted to align with NATO to prevent strong powers from dominating them, especially the CEE countries, which goes in line with the balance of power theory since they did not want to be dominated by Russia (Walt 1987: 18). While NATO was enlarging, it launched several partnership programs tending to strengthen democratic peace in the Transatlantic region. This went against the classical idea of alliance formation where alliances serve as a mechanism for collective defense and involve a mutual defense among allied states (Locatelli & Tesoni 2009: 346) that in the case of the partnership was not seen, since partners were not expected to assist in the event of a conflict. However, both enlargement and partnership framework were introduced as a strategic initiative called “democratic enlargement” (Burton 2017: 8) that would set a rules-based order in ex-Communist and partners’ countries.

Nowadays NATO maintains relationships with over 40 non-member states and international organizations (NATO 2024). The alliance develops these relationships based on shared values aimed at enhancing international security, peace, and stability (*ibid.*). Through its partnership framework, NATO opens parts of its processes, procedures, and structures to its partners, providing them with similar powers as members, except for the collective defense tool. This framework allows partners to consult with NATO allies, operate together, contribute to NATO-led operations and missions, and work with NATO allies on defense reforms, and capacity building (*ibid.*). This shows NATO's strategic opening from an exclusive orientation on Russia. However, even though this framework does not entail a commitment to mutual defense from partners, it is still considered relevant, as these partnerships consider building an international law-based order in like-minded states, that helps to deter Russia which also violates international law order, meaning that external threat is still in there. Recalling mutual defense commitment, then it is not available to partners because of

the limitations introduced in the North-Atlantic treaty (1949) where Article 10 states: “The Parties may, by unanimous agreement, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area to accede to this Treaty.” This strategic opening is a change of focus, even though there are still limitations for engagement with partners, meaning that a change of focus may be explained as an outcome of influence within the alliance.

The partnership framework began in 1990 when NATO pledged to extend “the hand of partnership” to former adversaries. The first significant steps were taken during the 2010 Lisbon Summit when it was decided to make the partnership framework more inclusive and strategically oriented (NATO 2010b). During the last 6 years, NATO has strengthened its role in supporting partners, upon request, to improve their defense institutions, governance, and resilience, and has adopted a new Strategic Concept, which recognizes that Euro-Atlantic security is best achieved through cooperation with countries and organizations worldwide (NATO 2018; NATO 2022). Today partnerships play an important role in two of NATO's core tasks - crisis management and cooperative security. However, the estrangement from the initial strategic focus and theoretical concept of alliance formation stays in since all partners are not committed to NATO's security issues and both balances of power and balance of threat theories are not visible in allies' strategic decisions in the context of partnership framework.

During the COVID-19 era was launched NATO 2030 strategy that acknowledged the growing influence of China and the importance of the Asian region for European security. Of the 40 global partners, four are in the Asia Pacific - Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea (NATO 2023; Hribernik 2013: 2). Asia-Pacific region faces both non-traditional security threats like terrorism, organized crime, maritime piracy, and cyberattacks as well as traditional ones like the North Korean nuclear threat, the Sino-Japanese standoff over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, and the Taiwan Strait conflict, which have the potential to directly affect NATO. Today each partner maintains bilateral relations with NATO, guided by a jointly agreed framework document that identifies areas of mutual interest for cooperation. The latest NATO 2022 Strategic Concept set a new strategic direction for the alliance also recognizing the importance of the Asia-Pacific region for the first time, stating that developments in the area can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security and outlining the importance of addressing cross-regional challenges and shared security interests

(NATO 2022). Before partnerships were not mainly precise in terms of their content and therefore did not extend the strategic focus of NATO to the precise region, since were not defined as a relevant geographic area for NATO. The emphasis on a geographical area's importance here dilutes the focus on European security, which is of primal importance to most European allies.

NATO recognized the importance of the Asia-Pacific region due to several reasons. Firstly, both American and European allies are directing their attention to the growing Asian defense market (Burton 2017: 13). Secondly, China is today viewed by NATO as a challenge (NATO 2023) and Russian-Chinese cooperation adds complexity to the topic. NATO identifies Russia as the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security, emphasizing the importance of partnerships in deterring this threat and gaining insights into the new challenges posed by both Russia and China (NATO 2023). Thirdly, China is believed to become more assertive in response to a growing European presence in Asia, seeking to consolidate its power before facing potential erosion of its position in the region (Burton 2017:14). This leads to the idea that although it is not a common external threat to allies, this may become a potential threat that gives a basis for alliance formation in the region.

In countering China and including the Asian region in strategic considerations of NATO, the United States appears to have an integral role. The US pivot to Asia began during the George W. Bush administration's efforts to engage with Beijing and dissuade it from pursuing regional dominance (Thompson 2021: 25). Today the USA has an Indo-Pacific strategy (2022), which states that the United States is an Indo-Pacific power and sets a goal to increase the commitment of allies and partners, particularly the EU and the NATO, to the Indo-Pacific region. The U.S. itself is committed to the region, since has ironclad treaty alliances with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), the Philippines, and Thailand. As American priorities shift from the Atlantic to the Pacific, there is an increasing recognition of allies' efforts in maintaining regional stability. This shows that the dominant state has enough power to start changing the opinions of other countries.

While this shift does not diminish U.S. interest in Europe, it may rebalance the attention and resources allocated to different regions. The resulting division of U.S. focus between the Asia-Pacific and European security environments may introduce competition between NATO and the

United States' Asia-Pacific allies (Burton 2017: 14). Both issues have the potential to directly involve NATO. In the event of escalation and US involvement, Washington could potentially invoke Article 4 or Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, involving the other 31 allied countries. However, European allies may find it challenging to resist supporting the US in the event of a U.S.-China military dispute, perceiving it as a case of entrapment (Hribernik 2013: 2). This dilemma extends beyond supporting or restraining the ally, involving considerations of collaboration with non-involved states to restrain both protagonists (Burton 2017: 15). When it comes to the presence or absence of a strategic opening towards Asia, the evidence above and centrally the adoption of the Asia-Pacific partnership, suggests that its approval is present. This provides the risks among the allies that this partnership framework may lead to less focus on the European theatre. This is also why it is puzzling to an extent because CEE allies approved this shift – despite their clear strategic preferences/interests in keeping NATO's focus where it is.

3.2. CEE countries' approval of NATO's strategic opening to Asia

The following three chapters will describe the approval and underlying considerations of all three states to identify whether hegemonic leadership was at play in shaping their approval, as it manifested itself in the adoption of the partnership described above.

3.2.1. Estonia's approval of NATO's strategic opening to Asia

Estonia has publicly approved NATO's strategic opening towards Asia during the Vilnius Summit in 2023 where Prime Minister Kaja Kallas mentioned that "NATO's cooperation with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea is more important than ever" (Vabariigi Valitsus 2023) meaning that the country shares NATO's approach to the topic. Even though it was only once when Estonian policymakers explicitly approved the NATO-AP4 partnership during the last 5 years, this mere adoption means that Estonia has approved the partnership.

Other evidence of approval shows that not only policymakers but also military sphere representatives like Commander of Estonian Defence Forces General Martin Herem believe that the Euro-Atlantic area and the Pacific Ocean region are interconnected due to similar threats: "Estonia and Japan perceive similar threats and are looking for similar solutions to counterbalance them (Kaitsevägi 2023)." In other analyzed statements it is also visible that Estonia usually stresses the

interconnection of two regions, which is a main argument of NATO and the U.S. that supports NATO-AP4 cooperation.

Overall Estonia approves the partnership framework and is interested in developing strategic partnerships with Asian states on both bilateral and NATO levels, stressing the importance of uniting with like-minded states. “We need to build connections and cooperate with those countries that can be trusted,” said Prime Minister Kaja Kallas during the Vilnius Summit (Vabariigi Valitsus 2023). Academic workers also suggest that Estonia should be committed to developing strategic partnerships with Asian countries, but mainly with those that fall into the U.S. influence, do not pose a threat to Estonia’s allies, and seek to build strong relations with states that can also contribute to the security of NATO (Tartu Ülikool 2021, 17). This provides a basis for the presence of U.S. hegemonic influence in considerations of Estonia. There is also evidence that the U.S. is mentioned during the meetings with Asian countries, meaning that the U.S. interests are also taken into consideration during the meetings. For instance, during President Karis’s visit to South Korea, he mentioned that “Estonia and South Korea alike value their friends and allies, including the United States” (ERR 2023a), which shows the importance of the U.S. role. Overall, it was found that Estonia has friendly and strong relations with Asian partners based on shared values such as democracy, rules-based order, peace, and stability, which are also shared with NATO. Estonia is interested in building stronger relations with countries based on analyzed statements during the meetings with Japan and South Korea. However, it was not found that Estonia is ready to defend Asian countries. However, it does not mean that Estonia is not ready to assist countries in the case of escalation.

3.2.2. Poland’s approval of NATO’s strategic opening to Asia

There is no public evidence that Poland has approved NATO’s strategic opening towards Asia. However, Polish support for cooperation with Asian states is visible since the country is willing to build stronger relations with Asian countries on the NATO level. The only statement that could explicitly refer to Polish approval is the meeting of Deputy Foreign Minister Władysław Teofil Bartoszewski with the U.S. State Department China Coordinator and Deputy Assistant Secretary Mark Lambert where Poland and the U.S. agreed on the importance of the Asia-Pacific partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland 2024). Since there were no explicit quotes

from any of the sides during this meeting it may give a hint that there might be a U.S. hegemonic influence in the calculations of approving this partnership. At the same time, it is enough to state that Poland has approved the partnership framework.

Even though the U.S. is not mentioned during the meetings with Asian partners, Poland mentions the importance of the NATO-AP4 partnership in meetings with the USA and has also visited with the U.S. and other 6 NATO members Japan to strengthen NATO-Japan bonds, where the pressure was put by South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik on the readiness of NATO to respond to North Korean threat. “The forces threatening South Korea, including North Korea, will face resolute responses not only from the South Korea-US alliance but also from the international community, including NATO”, said South Korean Defense Minister (Kim 2023).

Poland has approved NATO’s strategic opening towards Asia, and it is also found that Poland is willing to build stronger relations with all NATO Asian countries. Poland has friendly relations with Asian partners that are based on shared values such as rules-based order, democracy, human rights, and denuclearization. The topic of NATO usually appears in the bilateral cooperation talks as a field through which is possible to deepen relations. It also stressed that like-minded countries should be united. “Countries that think alike about peace, stability, and unity must cooperate closely, just like Poland and Japan,” said Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki during his meeting with the Japanese Prime Minister (Harper 2023). At the same time, there is no evidence that Poland is ready to defend Asian countries. However, it does not mean that Poland will not assist Asian partners if needed. In recent years.

3.2.3. Hungary’s approval of NATO’s strategic opening to Asia

Hungary has publicly approved NATO’s strategic opening towards Asia during the meeting of Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó with the Japanese side in 2021. The minister said that “NATO members would also consult with their Australian, South Korean, Japanese and New Zealand counterparts, noting that recent geopolitical events had heightened the importance of strengthening cooperation with Pacific partners,” said the minister (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2021). However, it is important to highlight that though Hungary supports this framework, they emphasize that this partnership must not involve any operations outside NATO’s borders. During the last NATO Summit in Vilnius Foreign Minister Szijjártó said that NATO should not become an “anti-China organization” adding that the alliance “was not formed against China, neither are

its current operations directed against China” (Permanent Delegation of Hungary to NATO 2023). Those statements show that Hungary is strongly committed to not changing NATO’s initial goal while also showing a Chinese influence on Hungarian approval. It was also seen when the same Foreign Minister stated: “For our part, we believe that cooperation with China, as it does with South Korea and Japan, provides massive opportunities” (*ibid.*). The US is not mentioned during bilateral meetings with Asian states as well and there is no evidence of the role of the U.S. in shaping Hungary’s approval meaning that China may have a role in the Hungarian approval. Hungary has approved NATO’s strategic opening towards Asia, and it is also found that Hungary has strong relations with all NATO Asian countries and is willing to strengthen them. For instance, Japan sees Hungary as a bridge between the two continents and Hungary has a vested interest in Japan (AboutHungary 2023c). At the same time, there is no evidence that Hungary is ready to defend Asian countries if needed. However, it does not mean that Hungary will not assist Asian partners if needed. There is also no evidence of the role of the U.S. in this approval. However, Hungary puts pressure that it is against this partnership targeting China, meaning that Chinese influence is seen to be growing and influencing even Hungarian calculations of NATO decisions.

4. U.S. hegemonic influence in CEE countries approval of NATO's strategic opening towards Asia

The following first chapter explains the role of the U.S. in NATO and afterward each chapter focuses on hegemonic influence in the considerations of the CEE states, by examining the connection between the initial interest of countries in NATO and the hegemon's role in the calculations of those states.

4.1. The U.S. hegemonic influence in NATO

The U.S. is a hegemon within the Alliance due to its predominant role in the alliance. According to Walt (1997: 171), alliances tend to last longer when there is an asymmetry of power and a strong alliance leader who exercises hegemonic power. This requires hegemon both the willingness and ability to bear the costs of leadership. During the Cold War, the U.S. played a dominant role in Europe due to the bipolar superpower confrontation with the Soviet Union. As a result, NATO, which was created to contain Soviet power, became a tool for the U.S. to exercise its power due to asymmetric interdependence between Europeans and Americans and substantial compatibility of interests among the allies (Locatelli & Tesoni 2009: 346). After the Cold War, the U.S.'s relative power position increased in Europe, giving it the ability to exercise its power over the ex-Communist states. This extension of control was also manifested by the ideological expansion of U.S. interests (*ibid.*). Washington's perception of its European security expanded, and the new era of security allowed the U.S. to prevent the re-emergence of a multipolar system with Europe and maintain its hegemony by preventing the emergence of rival great powers such as Russia or China (Dirzauskaite & Ilinca 2017: 66). Due to the reliance of European allies on U.S. military capabilities for 75 years, the U.S. can be considered the hegemon in NATO (*ibid.*; Locatelli & Tesoni 2009: 355). Asymmetry of power is still visible since the military budget of the U.S. is still the biggest in the alliance, which makes it the state with the most economic power (GFP 2024). Additionally, the U.S. influence is visible in the NATO treaty: "Any State so invited may become a Party to the Treaty by depositing its instrument of accession with the Government of the United States of America" (The North Atlantic Treaty 1949).

However, in the occurrence of any armed conflict, some European NATO members might choose neutrality to avoid being abandoned by the USA or being trapped in conflicts with the USA

(Snyder 1984: 486). While the USA is concerned about NATO being entrapped, Europeans face the risk of abandonment. Europe remains dependent on the U.S., therefore, many European states, and particularly the CEE countries, within the alliance agree to U.S. initiatives due to their strong reliance on US help and their commitment. This means that the U.S. has an influence over smaller allies' strategic decisions and may explain the approval of the partnership framework by CEE countries.

4.2. The role of the U.S. in Estonia's approval of NATO's strategic opening towards Asia

Estonia's initial interest in NATO according to the latest security concept is NATO membership and the collective defense pillar that goes with it. During the previous security concepts and in the admission speech, the idea was the same. It shows that NATO membership is rooted in Estonia's defense capabilities. The alliance's umbrella can expand safety and build stability, thereby reinforcing Estonia's security and that of its allies. Estonian policymakers hold the view that without NATO membership, Estonia's independence would have been at greater risk in the face of emerging security threats (ERR 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). "...if Estonia had remained in the so-called grey zone, it is conceivable that what we are currently witnessing in Ukraine could have taken place on our territory", noted Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margus Tsahkna (ERR 2024c). The same minister stated that "without NATO membership Estonia's independence would be questioned" (*ibid.*). It also goes in line with the fact that Estonia chose to enter NATO as a bandwagoning, due to NATO's greater capabilities to deter Russia and therefore find a shelter. Estonia remains committed to working with its allies and partners to promote lasting peace and security worldwide. The country also expects from NATO that if anything should happen in Estonia, then NATO will be ready to help. Since Estonia has the same values as NATO, the degree of explicitness that could mitigate concerns of fear of abandonment or entrapped does not much influence Estonia since it believes that it also needs to fight for its allies if needed.

Turning to the presence of U.S. hegemonic leadership in Estonia's calculations of NATO's strategic opening towards Asia, it is visible that U.S. hegemony is evident in Estonia, and it influences Estonian foreign policy in the security cooperation field. Estonia values its relationship with the U.S. as well as the U.S. is committed to supporting Estonia and the Baltic States according

to U.S. Ambassador George P. Kent, who also exemplifies this with the statement that Estonia and the U.S. are stronger together. “During my tenure as US Ambassador to Estonia, I have consistently driven home the message that we are stronger together. This has not been an idle catch phrase or hashtag for social media postings, but an enduring truth,” said U.S. Ambassador about their relations with Estonia (U.S. Embassy in Estonia 2024). Estonia is very active in international missions that are taking place away from their region, meaning that hegemonic leadership influences Estonia’s strategic decisions and military activity beyond Estonia’s borders. Estonia is also praised for it by the USA: “We honor the memory of those who have fallen, salute the sacrifice of the wounded, and deeply appreciate all Estonians who have served and continue to serve to defend not just Estonia but our security and shared values” (*ibid.*).

Also, the country propagates the importance of the US in international security. For instance, President Karis (The official website of the President of Estonia 2023b) said that “authoritarian regimes everywhere are keeping a close eye on how the United States and the free world as a whole respond to this attack on international law and democratic values.” The website of the Ministry of Defense also stresses that “close relations with the United States continue to be the cornerstone of Estonia's security policy” (Kaitseministeerium 2021). Estonia's goal is to align itself with great powers, as demonstrated by its close relationship with the US, which is seen as the most effective way to counter the Russian threat. Estonia has built its strategic culture on NATO membership and advanced relations with the US, and it actively participates in international military cooperation, both bilaterally and multilaterally. The US sees Estonia as “a thought leader within the Alliance” (U.S. embassy in Tallinn 2024).

Hegemonic leadership is mainly visible when a hegemon provides a security guarantee and wants as a return the loyalty from the state. Estonia has gained its security with the help of the U.S. and NATO; therefore, it proves itself as a loyal state. Estonia acknowledges the United States' strategic opening towards Asia, as the country seeks to expand its relations and activities in the Pacific Ocean. Estonian policymakers also mention the importance of being united with like-minded states meaning that both countries see the importance of accommodating the U.S. For instance, the Estonian ambassador to South Korea Sten Schwede mentioned that “you can never have too many good, like-minded friends, especially in complex times, which the current security situation most certainly qualifies as” (Korea JoongAng Daily 2021b). This shows that Estonia does not weaken

its commitment to NATO's and the U.S. foreign political goals and therefore has stayed loyal to hegemonic influence within the alliance for the past 20 years.

With a view on U.S. hegemonic leadership as a factor in the considerations of Estonian foreign policymakers, these findings suggest that if any conflict escalates in the Asian region, Estonia will politically support any kind of operations, and will consider its physical presence in such operations even though it does not have any current strategic interest in defending those partners. The presence of U.S. hegemonic leadership in Estonian foreign policy is present and will influence future calculations in the context of the NATO-AP4 partnership approval, as well as the decision to deepen the partnership or launch peacekeeping missions in the region.

4.2.1. Other findings concerning the approval of strategic opening towards Asia by Estonia

Estonia has approved the partnership and there is evident US hegemonic influence which is a central explanatory factor of the approval. However, during the analysis, other factors were found that may contribute to the approval of NATO's strategic opening towards Asia by Estonia.

It was found that the partnership framework fits Estonian foreign political values and strategic interest which is the deterrence of Russia and other authoritarian regimes. This also supports Estonia's initial interest in NATO which is to deter Russia by aligning with greater powers showing that nonetheless, U.S. hegemonic influence is present. It is visible when Estonia finds a connection between the Asian security issues and European security issues. For instance, Vice-Chairman of the Estonian Parliament, Toomas Kivimägi, noted in 2023 that "although Japan may be geographically distant, there is a shared interest in promoting regional security and stability, since there is only one country between Estonia and Japan – Russia" (Riigikogu 2023). Estonia also emphasizes the hostile neighbor's threat as a basis for the relations with Asian states that is shared with both South Korea and Japan as well as understanding, what threat Russia perceives. "As states bordering Russia, both Estonia and Japan have a very clear-eyed view of the situation," said Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna adding that due to growing Russian aggression, like-minded states must stick together (ERR2024a). Prime Minister Kaja Kallas also parallels that "two states need to be united in defending both regions' values and the world order based on international law, which Russia, as well as other non-democratic forces, are trying to destroy at all costs" (Vabariigi Valitsus 2023). More evidence statements that may illustrate the approval by

Estonia show that both Estonian academic workers (Tartu Ülikool 2021, 9), as well as policymakers, believe that any conflict in Asia in which Russia is also complicit can have an impact on European security, showing Estonian interpretation of interconnection of two regions. For instance, the president of the Estonian Republic Alar mentioned during his last year visit to South Korea that “the steps Russia is taking to expand military cooperation with North Korea – breaching resolutions of the UN Security Council in doing so – are damaging to the security of both our regions” (The official website of the President of Estonia 2023a).

The approval of the partnership framework also fits Estonian strategic interests in the region. Mainly the country is interested in cyber cooperation with Asian partners that are also partners of NATO’s CCDCOE center. Estonia is also interested in the Asian defense industry market. For instance, an Estonian company Milrem Robotics is providing its vehicles to New Zealand, Australia, and Japan, reflecting the trust and cooperation between the nations. Estonia is also supplying K9 howitzers from the ROK, which is a significant step towards strengthening defense cooperation. President Alar Karis has praised the K9 howitzers for their global reputation and suitability to Estonia's security situation (The official website of the President of Estonia 2023a). Supplying new ammunition, however, fits Estonian main strategic interest – deterrence of Russia. This shows that though the central explanatory factor of approval is U.S. hegemonic leadership, Estonia has also found via these strategic opening possibilities to accommodate its interests. However, since Estonia puts itself with the U.S. and the free world against authoritarian regimes, it shows that in building its strategic interests U.S. hegemonic influence is also present.

4.3. The role of the U.S. in Poland’s approval of NATO’s strategic opening towards Asia.

Poland’s initial interest in NATO according to the latest security concept lies in NATO membership and collective defense availability. Since joining the alliance in 1999, Poland put pressure on NATO’s collective defense opportunity as a vital aspect of its membership. In its admission speech, Poland also stressed the importance of belonging to the community and has strived to be a model for other aspiring Eastern European countries. It means that Poland’s initial interests go in line with the idea that NATO provides shelter to smaller and more vulnerable states as well as this membership is a possibility to redistribute power to their advantage (Pederson 2023: 444).

During the last 25 years, Poland was not only a beneficiary of NATO but also an active participant who enhanced its capabilities. This supports the alliance shelter theory that suggests that small states' entrance to the alliance enhances their resilience to threats. Poland recognizes the importance of maintaining NATO's full spectrum of military and political capabilities and solidarity between Allies. Poland is committed to supporting NATO's transformation while ensuring the modernization of its armed forces. Poland understands that the NATO plays a significant role in promoting peace and security in the region and beyond. Poland is committed to working closely with NATO to counteract new threats and challenges. From NATO Poland expects to be secured and helped if anything would threaten Poland's security, meaning that Poland is seeking for security guarantee from the organization.

Turning to the presence of U.S. hegemonic leadership of the role of the U.S. in Poland's calculations of NATO's strategic opening towards Asia, it is visible that US hegemonic influence is present in Poland. This is seen in the Polish attitude towards the USA, whom they call the most important non-European partner. It is worth noting that the U.S. also calls Poland "a stalwart ally in Central Europe and one of the United States' strongest partners in fostering security and prosperity regionally, throughout Europe, and the world" (U.S. Department of State 2021). This year U.S. has also praised the friendship with Poland when Secretary Anthony J. Blinken stated: "When Poland adopted the first modern constitution in Europe, 233 years ago today, the friendship between our peoples was already well-established. That friendship, based on ties of family and shared values, has never been on firmer footing" (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Poland 2024). Ministry of Defence of Poland (2024) also states that "Polish-American relations have a key impact on NATO's security system, especially its eastern flank". Poland aims to further develop this relationship in the spirit of solidarity and sustainable partnership by becoming "US's most important partner in continental Europe" as suggested by U.S. policymakers (Karnitsching & Kość 2022). As hegemonic leadership suggests, allies must be obedient and loyal, and those quotes show Poland has been a loyal state from the perspective of the U.S. Poland is also participating in missions, recognizing the importance of the US security guarantee for Europe, and supporting efforts to ensure the broadest possible military presence of the US in Europe. However, though Poland like Estonia is dependent on partners, which also influences their strategic decisions, it was found that a degree of explicitness influences Polish concerns. Mainly there is a present fear of abandonment that became visible during Biden's administration. During the COVID-19 Pandemic, US-

Polish relations experienced some challenges, which were addressed through constructive dialogue, but still gave rise to Polish concerns about whether the U.S. would be with them in case of a conflict. There have been some conflicts in recent years, such as the media law that targeted the US-owned TVN24 channel (although the law was vetoed by President of Poland Andrzej Duda) and a lack of consultation by Poland on issues like North Stream 2. This has caused Poland to question the US's good faith as their biggest ally, while the US side has felt that Poland is ignoring their overtures and assuming the worst of them (Gwozdz-Palokat 2022). However, it did not influence the U.S. role in Polish foreign political decisions.

With a view on U.S. hegemonic leadership as a factor in the considerations of Polish foreign policymakers, these findings suggest that if any conflict escalates in the Asian region, Poland will politically support any kind of operations, and will consider its physical presence in such operations even though it does not have any current strategic interest in defending those partners. The presence of U.S. hegemonic leadership in Polish foreign policy is present and will influence future calculations in the context of the NATO-AP4 partnership approval, as well as the decision to deepen the partnership or launch peacekeeping missions in the region.

4.3.1. Other findings concerning the approval of strategic opening towards Asia by Poland

Poland has approved the partnership and there is evident US hegemonic influence which is a central explanatory factor of the approval. However, during the analysis, other factors were found that may contribute to the approval of NATO's strategic opening towards Asia by Poland.

The approval of the Partnership framework fits Polish strategic interest and foreign political value, which is the deterrence of Russia. For reaching that goal Poland is mainly modernizing its military capabilities. For instance, the Minister of National Defense, Mariusz Błaszczak, has many times noted during the last 3 years that Poland's army has significant requirements, including the replacement of post-Soviet tanks with modern ones (Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland 2021; 2022; 2023). Therefore, Poland started to equip itself with South Korean arms equipment (*ibid.*). Poland and South Korea have established a close partnership in the defense industry. This includes a training program for Polish fighter pilots and the purchase of advanced military equipment such as K2 tanks and K9 howitzers from Korea.

There is more evidence that shows that supports the argument that approval fits the Polish strategic interest of deterring Russia. For example, Poland and Japan share an understanding of the threat posed by Russia to world peace and international order, as stated by former Prime Minister Morawiecki: "Our countries lie on two extreme sides, the borders of Russia, but we perfectly understand the threat posed by Russian imperialism to world peace and international order" (Harper 2023). Poland like Estonia also sees a connection between North Korea and Russia and emphasizes it. For instance, in 2022, President Duda expressed Poland's willingness to convey a message of peace to North Korea, which demonstrates Poland's commitment to contribute to the peace process in the region. This shows that though the central explanatory factor of approval is U.S. hegemonic leadership, Poland has also found via these strategic opening possibilities to accommodate its interests. However, since Poland puts itself with the free world against authoritarian regimes, it shows that in building its strategic interests U.S. hegemonic influence is also present as well as the fact that Poland opened itself to the Asian defence market only after the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine when parallelly the U.S. approved its Indo-Pacific strategy that aims to make other Allies more interested in the Asia-Pacific region.

4.4. The role of the U.S. in Hungary's approval of NATO's strategic opening towards Asia

Hungary's initial interest in NATO according to Hungary's accession speech was anchoring themselves to the Western coast. Though this initial interest is different from those mentioned in Polish and Estonian examples, Hungary still stresses the importance of NATO's collective defense principle, although acknowledging that its NATO membership may make Hungary even more vulnerable and a potential target of attacks, given its location at the crossroads of NATO's Eastern and Southern flanks. "In the event of a large-scale and intensive global war, Hungary – as a member of NATO – may be affected as part the European theatre, and may even become a target of attacks," states the National Security Strategy of Hungary (Government of Hungary 2021). Nowadays Hungary remains committed to maintaining consistency between national and NATO defense planning processes that have started to diverge during the last years. Transatlantic bonds and collective defense are seen as a cornerstone of Hungary's independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity, and security. Active contribution to collective defense and security is also Hungary's top

security policy obligation. From NATO Hungary expects the same. Hungary looks forward to NATO remaining strong and effective in protecting the territorial integrity, political independence, and security of its member states. This means that Hungary is behaving as stated in alliance shelter theory - small states are seeking shelters to enhance their resilience and secure themselves (Pederson 2023, 444). However, in 2012, Hungary placed great emphasis on strengthening NATO's relationship with other third countries and continues to support this goal, which diverges from alliance formation theories, where pressure is put on dealing with only the potential threats that could have a direct impact, as well as the initial interest of the state – anchoring to the West.

The theoretical framework suggests that states to whom the security guarantee was provided are loyal, then this characteristic is absent here. However, it is worth noting that in 2004 hegemonic influence of the U.S. was present in Hungary and the U.S. has been an important partner in the global fight against terrorism and has played a crucial role in fostering a strong transatlantic partnership. Hungary believed that a united Europe should result in a stronger alliance with the United States, where smaller countries like Hungary are not forced to choose between the two (Government of Hungary 2004). The absence of Hungarian loyalty is seen in the US concerns over perceived Russian and Chinese influence in Hungary. Hungary, for instance, has expressed some concerns over the U.S.'s role in the war in Ukraine, calling the war in Ukraine the war led by the USA that US accepted as “dangerously unhinged anti-American messaging” (Bayer 2024) and was argued with the following statement by US ambassador David Pressman: “We can neither understand nor accept the prime minister identifying the United States as a ‘top adversary’ of our ally Hungary” (*ibid*). According to Snyder (1984: 468), if a state weakens its commitment, it can decrease the risk of entrapment, enhance bargaining power over the ally, preserve the option for realignment, but increase the risk of abandonment and diminish the reputation for loyalty. Since Hungary is weakening its support for the US goals, it diminishes its reputation as a loyal state and increases the risk of being abandoned due to the interest in realignment.

Though the two states remain committed to maintaining a positive and cooperative relationship, U.S. hegemony is not present in Hungary, therefore Hungarian interest in Asian partners is based on other factors. During the analysis, it was found that China and Hungary are strengthening their partnership in the field of internal security. The Chinese military is also willing to deepen ex-

changes according to Chinese Defence Minister General Wei: “Chinese military is willing to expand and deepen exchanges and cooperation with the Hungarian military in a bid to push the military-to-military relations to a new level (Ministry of National defense of PRC 2021).” Hungary recognizes the importance of balancing its relationships with both China and the West and is committed to ensuring that its policies and decisions are in line with its values and interests. Chinese hegemonic influence is also visible in Hungarian statements on U.S. hegemony. Prime Minister Victor Orbán has said that in a war between China and the US, the latter may lose: “War is not inevitable, but the USA does not accept that it has become the world’s second most powerful nation” (Woods 2023). This shows there is an absent U.S. hegemonic leadership. In contrast, China has a strong presence in Hungary, which explains why US influence is lacking.

With a view on absent U.S. hegemonic leadership as a factor in the considerations of Hungarian foreign policymakers, these findings suggest that if any conflict escalates in the Asian region, Hungary will likely choose a neutral political stance. The presence of U.S. hegemonic leadership in Hungarian foreign policy is absent and will not influence future calculations in the context of the NATO-AP4 partnership approval, as well as the decision to deepen the partnership or launch peacekeeping missions in the region. However, the Chinese influence may have a role in Hungarian approval and strategic decisions.

4.4.1. Other findings concerning Hungary’s approval of strategic opening towards Asia

Hungary has approved the partnership and there is no evident US hegemonic influence meaning it is not a central explanatory factor of the approval. During the analysis, other factors were found that strategic interest in Asia may contribute to Hungary’s approval of NATO’s strategic opening towards Asia in addition to the present Chinese influence already mentioned in the previous chapter.

This approval fits the Hungarian growing strategic interest in the Asian defense market. For instance, Hungary supplies ammunition from the Australian company Rheinmetall to advance the military equipment of the Hungarian Armed Forces. This shows a similar parallel with Estonia and Poland also being interested in the Asian defense market meaning that it can mean Hungary is

willing to be a reliable partner to its NATO allies while upgrading its defense capabilities as well as will to gain an advantage from this partnership framework to benefit themselves.

This approval also fits the current Hungarian strategic interest in aligning with East Asian countries. Hungary considers the region vital. "...the hegemony of the West has come to an end, and the East has not only caught up with but in many cases has overtaken it," said Hungarian Foreign Minister (Brader 2022). Specifically, Hungary views China and Japan as the primary hegemonic powers, with Korea being "sandwiched in the middle" according to former Hungarian ambassador to South Korea Mozes Csoma (Lee 2018). The Chinese influence shows that it might have a play in approval since Hungary is pivoting to Asia believing that it provides them big opportunities. "For our part, we believe that cooperation with China, as it does with South Korea and Japan, provides massive opportunities...", said the Hungarian Foreign Minister during the Vilnius Summit (Permanent Delegation of Hungary to NATO 2023). This shows that approval could be explained by Hungary's strategic interest in finding new great powers to align with them and supporting the decrease of the U.S. influence.

5. General overview of the findings: U.S. hegemonic influence in CEE countries approval of NATO's strategic opening towards Asia

Taking into consideration above analyzed phenomenon, the approval by all the researched CEE allies (here Poland, Hungary, Estonia) of the NATO-AP4 partnership framework, and the presence of hegemonic leadership, in the form of a concern to accommodate U.S. interests, these findings suggest that adoption of NATO-AP4 partnership as strategic opening of NATO towards Asia, and approval of CEE countries to it despite their main concern with European security issues, is because of the hegemonic influence in considerations of the CEE countries. The theoretical part introduced that hegemonic leadership makes states more loyal while hegemon influences allies and it corresponds with findings, even when the influence was not direct but rather exercised through the perceptions of someone as a leader rather than by the leader pressuring them.

However, not only hegemonic influence is an explanatory factor to the approval. The analysis also suggests that the presence of countries' strategic interests in the region was at stake. Estonia and Poland are seeking to enhance their relations with Asian states to strengthen their capabilities to deter Russian threats. This supports the idea that small allies build relationships with the outside world to enhance their resilience. However, since the U.S. puts itself against authoritarian regimes, and the strategic interest of Estonia and Poland is also deterrence on authoritarian regimes, this presents that their strategic interests are also shaped by U.S. interests. Even though there are alternative explanations, in the light of the theoretical framework, this evidence can be interpreted as accommodating U.S. interests in the region, while trying to benefit from it. However, the U.S. hegemonic influence is absent in the Hungarian example, while Chinese influence is present. Hungary seems to be trying to benefit from having good relations with China and being a member of NATO to secure itself. By collaborating with NATO and the US, Hungary aims to secure its external borders, while working with China to protect its internal security. This means that Hungary as a small state has a fear of entrapment by NATO allies and therefore tries to decrease this risk by aligning with new great powers, however increasing the risk of abandonment.

The hypotheses stated that if hegemonic leadership exists in the context of strategic choices, then smaller allies are willing to agree to alliance strategies that are not in their direct interest. This hypothesis has found evidence in all three cases meaning that hegemonic leadership can explain the approval of strategic decisions that are contradictory to the national interests of small states.

Conclusion

During the last few years, concerns over Asian security have increased due to China's aggressive behavior. When NATO decided to expand the strategic focus of the alliance by building strong partnerships with like-minded states, it caused concern among the member states that shared a border with Russia. As a result, there was a debate on who would contribute to the expansion and how much. Additionally, there were limitations on external involvement in crisis response operations, as member states needed to retain the capabilities to protect their borders and ensure homeland security.

The thesis was interested in finding out what explains CEE countries' approval of NATO's strategic opening to Asia. For that were analyzed statements, speeches, and interviews of Estonia's, Poland's, and Hungary's policymakers. Also, the thesis was willing to test the hypotheses that stated if hegemonic leadership exists in the context of approval of the partnership framework, then secondary allies are willing to agree to alliance strategies that are not in their direct interest.

The analysis revealed that CEE countries have approved NATO's strategic opening towards Asia because of the U.S. hegemonic influence on their calculations regarding the approval. This shows that CEE countries are influenced by hegemonic leadership in their calculations regarding strategic decisions. This also means that hegemonic leadership influences the smaller allies' perception of the partnership framework by believing that the Euro-Atlantic region and the Pacific Ocean region are interconnected and willing to expand their strategic interests with like-minded states that are both NATO partners and fall under U.S. influence. This also shows that states where hegemonic influence is present may also consider further expansion of the strategic focus as well as their participation in missions in the region if needed, since share the hegemon's interests. However, Hungary serves as an example where there is also visible Chinese influence on Hungary's perception, with Hungary aiming for the partnership not to be seen as "anti-Chinese". Hegemonic leadership also encourages states to become more open in the region and engage more by building strong relations.

Since hegemonic leadership played a role in the approval of the researched CEE countries for the NATO-AP4 partnership, it can be stated that indeed stronger powers can steer the focus of an alliance and smaller allies are likely to accommodate the interests of strong allies and even benefit from it. The benefit that those states derive from it lies mainly in the expansion of strategic relations

with Asian states and building more friendly relationships due to shared values on security issues. The thesis also shows that the alliance shelter theory suggests that small states that join an alliance must pay a cost in the form of dependency, but they still derive benefits and enhance their resilience by being part of the alliance. At the same time, the thesis shows that after joining an alliance and integrating into it, states change and gain similar strategic interests with greater allies, which is the outcome of the influence of greater power.

The thesis was a single-case study, meaning that it was focused on a specific group of states to explain the phenomenon. Since the Asia-Pacific partnership framework is still a new topic in the international security field, it requires further research regarding different theoretical approaches, especially how the topic can be approached from the viewpoints of institutionalists, constructivists, and other alliance theories. The topic can also be studied from the perspectives of other NATO allies as well as other international organizations. To study the topic of Central and Eastern European (CEE) approval of the partnership framework, a multiple case study could be employed to identify similarities and differences among all CEE region states. Hungarian example also showed a different approach to the topic meaning that the Hungarian case as well as the case of other countries that politically diverge from other European allies can be observed to explore this phenomenon.

The Asia-Pacific partnership differs from other partnership frameworks because the USA states that it is also an Indo-Pacific country and has security agreements with many Pacific Ocean states. Therefore, the USA and NATO will be involved in the conflict if it escalates. Most of the CEE states could join missions led by the US in the region to show loyalty to the hegemon, like other NATO missions. However, any fights that might take place in the Pacific Ocean are different from those that took place before. CEE countries will most likely support NATO missions in the Pacific Ocean. These countries will also most likely support deepening the partnership framework if needed. Even though the Hungarian example shows that China may influence some CEE countries' approval and readiness to support NATO in the Pacific Ocean, political support for resolving any conflict in the Asia-Pacific will be present.

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