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Research paper

The other neorealism: Kindermann and the Munich School

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ABSTRACT

Why can the same shift in the distribution of power generate divergent foreign policy responses? This article reconstructs Gottfried-Karl Kindermann's synoptic neorealism to specify what constellation analysis can explain. Kenneth Waltz's structural realism identifies pressures and recurrent patterns at the international level. Kindermann's method offers a finer-grained account of foreign policy by linking those pressures to how decision makers interpret changing capabilities in light of strategic relationships, political priorities, and expectations about other actors. The article identifies what the Munich School retains from classical realism and where it departs from Hans J. Morgenthau's treatment of power and interest. It then examines the role of perception and shows how the method's analytical categories help evaluate competing explanations of foreign policy choices. A hypothetical comparison examines how two governments with different relationships to a third state might respond to its military buildup. One government may see the same capability gain as a source of protection, while the other may see it as a threat. The comparison identifies evidence that could distinguish the effects of interpretation from differences in material exposure. It also shows how governments that agree on the threat may still make different choices depending on how directly each is affected by the buildup, what domestic constraints it faces, and what its alliances require. Constellation analysis thus helps formulate and evaluate case-specific explanations that connect systemic pressures to foreign policy decisions. Its explanatory value depends on evidence about decision makers' perceptions and the alternatives available to them before they acted.

Keywords: constellation analysis, foreign policy, Kindermann, Munich School, neorealism

An increase in a state's military capabilities changes what that state can do. It can also change how other governments assess an adversary's intentions or the credibility of a partner's commitments. The distinction matters for scholars explaining foreign policy and for officials deciding whether a partner needs reassurance or whether an adversary is likely to see a deployment as coercive. Research on Finland and Sweden after Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine illustrates the practical stakes. Both governments applied to join NATO, although their initial responses differed (Savolainen, 2024). In Finland, a shift in public opinion and an elite reassessment of the adequacy of existing security arrangements both mattered (Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2024). An explanation that begins with the regional shock must therefore also account for when particular options became politically feasible and how officials judged existing arrangements.

This article asks why the same shift in the distribution of capabilities can produce different foreign policy responses and how Kindermann's constellation analysis can help explain those differences. Recent scholarship places the Munich School within a wider family of realist approaches to foreign policy (Hynek & Šenk, 2026). Meibauer (2020) argues that ideas expressed in political deliberation can mediate between material interests and

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foreign policy choices. This article develops that insight into a problem of causal attribution. A shared change creates constraints and opportunities, whose policy significance depends on governments' material exposure, relationships, assessments, and feasible options. The claim is conditional. An interpretation helps explain a decision when evidence connects the assessment to the choice among options and establishes why material conditions and institutional constraints alone provide an incomplete account.

Building on an earlier account of the Munich School (Caman, 2007), the article reconstructs Kindermann's method from his primary writings and compares its explanatory task with that of Waltz's structural realism. A hypothetical military buildup clarifies which observations would help distinguish a change in perception from a change in exposure or feasibility. The discussion then uses published studies of Finland's and Sweden's NATO decisions to illustrate the problem of causal attribution and draws out implications for research and security assessment. The study's contribution is conceptual and methodological. The published cases illustrate the explanatory problem. The hypothetical comparison specifies the evidence needed to investigate it..

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current realist scholarship gives several grounds for treating state responses as an open empirical question. Meibauer (2020) distinguishes ideas from interests and examines how competing ideas expressed in political deliberation mediate between material interests and foreign policy choices. Meibauer (2023) also examines the place of history in structural and neoclassical realism, raising the question of how historically contingent explanations relate to more general claims. Jørgensen and Ergul Jorgensen (2021) discuss the Munich School as part of the broader development of realist theory in Europe. Hynek and Šenk (2026) identify the Munich School as an early and distinctive tradition whose account of foreign policy combines actor characteristics, interactions, and systemic conditions. Their assessment also underscores the demands of such a broad inquiry. The present article addresses those demands by specifying how a comparison can establish which factors matter for a particular decision.

Recent empirical research provides leverage on that problem. Savolainen (2024) finds that Finland moved promptly toward alliance protection after the Russian invasion, whereas Sweden initially tried to maintain nonalignment. The eventual convergence on NATO applications obscures the different paths to that decision. Pesu and Iso-Markku (2024) show that Finland's turn to membership involved both an elite reassessment of existing arrangements and a change in public opinion. Read together, these accounts make timing and the viability of alternative security arrangements central to the explanation. They also motivate the analytical distinction used below between an event's military consequences, officials' assessments of those consequences, and the ability of a government to act on its assessment.

From classical realism to the Munich School

Morgenthau supplies the starting point for Kindermann's account of political action. The realist concepts of power and interest allow an analyst to ask what decision makers seek and what means are available to them. They also direct attention to conflict, prudence, and the consequences of acting under conditions of competing political purposes (Morgenthau, 1967). Kindermann's engagement with Morgenthau preserves these concerns while asking how the meaning of a capability or a political interest changes across concrete relationships (Kindermann, 1991d, pp. 15–19; Kindermann, 1991e, p. 52).

The difference relevant here concerns how interests enter the explanation. In the account developed below, analysts reconstruct what decision makers considered desirable, attainable, and worth the costs of pursuit. An analyst can then compare this reconstruction with the constraints visible from outside the decision-making process. This distinction leaves room for misjudgment and disagreement within a government as well as variation across governments. It also helps explain why the acquisition of capabilities can be interpreted as defensive, coercive, or largely irrelevant, depending on the relationships and issues under examination.

Systemic pressures and foreign policy choices

Morgenthau's classical realist theory began to lose significance toward the end of the 1980s, for several important reasons. According to Eralp, realism failed to anticipate developments and transformations in the international system after 1989 and proved inadequate to the analysis of this process of change (Eralp, 1996, p. 85). Meyers argues that realist theory was constructed through the scholarly rationalization of a model-like reconstruction of the Cold War, thereby supplying it with a theoretical foundation (Meyers, 1997, p. 376). Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that the end of the Cold War weakened the realist paradigm.

In fact, realism had been criticized and challenged long before the Cold War ended. The behavioralist school criticized realism for advancing hypotheses that had not been empirically tested and were not open to testing, arguing that realism was insufficiently scientific (Yalvaç, 1996, p. 149). According to Yalvaç, these criticisms brought the concept of system to the center of International Relations. Waltz likewise criticizes classical realism

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for its inability to explain irregularities in the international system. Morgenthau, for example, explains war in terms of a human drive for power. Yet if this were indeed the explanation, should war not be continuous? (Schörnig, 2003, pp. 61–62; Yalvaç, 1996, p. 149) The critique formulated by the mathematician and psychologist Anatol Rapoport, directed particularly at the assumption of nuclear deterrence within realism's balance-of-power model, weakened the assumption of rationality central to realist theory. According to this critique, a policy of nuclear deterrence intended rationally to establish a balance of power could not itself be considered rational, because it irrationally incorporated the possibility of self-annihilation (List et al., 1995, p. 38). These criticisms, together with subsequent empirical and theoretical challenges, unsettled realism's global predominance. Yet they also contributed positively to its development by encouraging revision and modification within the realist paradigm, without discounting the influence of other determining factors. The result was neorealism—or, more accurately, neorealisms.

Waltz's structural realism explains patterns and pressures that arise from anarchy and the distribution of capabilities (Waltz, 1979). A theory at that level can identify incentives and constraints that recur across cases. Waltz (1996) explicitly distinguished the theory of international politics from a theory of foreign policy. It would therefore misstate his project to treat variation in particular government decisions as a failed prediction of structural realism. That variation is the phenomenon for which the present article turns to Kindermann.

The first edition of the volume edited by Gottfried-Karl Kindermann appeared in 1977 (Kindermann, 1977). Constellation analysis provides a way to move from a general account of pressures to an investigation of decisions in a particular setting (Kindermann, 1991a, p. 55). The analyst delimits the relevant period and identifies the actors whose capabilities, relationships, and decisions bear on the outcome. Anarchy or a distribution of capabilities can be part of this account, alongside variables that differ within the same international structure, such as bilateral commitments, decision makers' expectations, and the political feasibility of different responses.

Hynek and Šenk (2026, p. 13) situate the Munich School within a broader genealogy of neoclassical realism. Their classification is retrospective: they identify affinities with neoclassical realism in the school's account of how systemic conditions, political actors, and their perceptions jointly shape foreign policy. Kindermann's own designation for the approach was synoptic neorealism.

The comparison therefore turns on what each approach treats as the outcome to be explained. Structural realism helps identify what governments are responding to at the systemic level. Constellation analysis asks how those pressures become relevant to particular choices. This does not mean that adding detail always improves an explanation. The analyst must justify why a particular historical experience, relationship, or decision-making constraint mattered and identify evidence that would distinguish its effects from those of rival explanations.

The term neorealism indicates that this new theoretical orientation does not define itself solely through the older tradition of classical political realism but pursues new research strategies. Examining the neorealist Munich School through its own theoretical and analytical categories therefore serves both to specify its theoretical and methodological departures from classical realism and to provide the reader with a systematic exposition.

The historical context of strategic judgment

Like Morgenthau, Kindermann argues that empirical-anthropological inquiry must illuminate the typical elements of human political conduct, notwithstanding their numerous variations across time and space, and that these constitute the most important source of scholarly knowledge. Kindermann describes Political Science as an empirical discipline (*Erfahrungswissenschaft*) that seeks to systematize experience and construct types. Unlike Morgenthau, however, Kindermann's neorealism emphasizes comparing and analyzing concrete constellations rather than the history of political thought. Three groups of determinants, always intertwined, are relevant here. First, analogous continuities in human conduct can be identified across historical epochs and regions. These alone make possible an intersubjective understanding of human thought and conduct across millennia and within the sociopolitical systems of unfamiliar countries, cultures, and continents. Second, determinants specific to particular periods and systems must be assessed in relation to their temporal and spatial variability. Third, analysis must incorporate the unique or contingent features that may arise within any constellation: that which cannot be repeated or subsumed under a type (Kindermann, 1991d, p. 13).

Historical processes are understood as subject to change, while analysis takes account of the coexisting political, socioeconomic, and cultural system types whose significance for the dynamics and outcomes of historical development should not be underestimated. The scholar's task is to identify relative regularities and constants within historical processes. Significant continuities can be identified particularly in human psychology. It is not difficult, for example, to discern certain regularities in human motivations and in patterns of action and reaction. Despite changes in the civilizational and cultural environment created by human beings themselves, human conduct in interpersonal and, especially, interstate relations has changed comparatively little (Kindermann, 1991b, pp. 65–66). By identifying intelligible basic forms of human volition, emotion, and reaction within a historical-anthropological framework, it becomes possible to adopt a conception of history that connects past, present, and

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future as a continuum, rather than treating history as a chronological, linear sequence. Identifying typical causal relationships, strategies, priorities, and related features within international constellations, and comparing them with contemporary constellations, can thereby produce more accurate and better-grounded probabilistic assessments of the future.

How systemic conditions reach decision makers

The point of departure here is an international system without a central authority, in which states operate under conditions of structural anarchy (Meyers, 1997, p. 379). International relations cannot be understood simply as the aggregate of state actions. The components of the system—principally nation-states—strive to achieve such objectives as continued existence, security, and the acquisition or preservation of independence. This requires nation-states to assert their interests through their own efforts. A persistent struggle consequently emerges among the constituent units of the international system. Within this struggle, different configurations arise according to states' relative power: what Kindermann calls different constellations. The international system is therefore in motion and has the character of a process. As Meyers puts it, the international system affects nation-states much as the market affects firms (Meyers, 1997, p. 379). Thus, not only do the constituent units affect the system; the system that emerges also affects its constituent units. This interpretation may be regarded as a significant departure from the assumptions of classical realism. If the international system is understood as a whole, Kindermann maintains that it is composed of smaller subsystems (Kindermann, 1991f, p. 107). Kindermann's neorealist approach seeks to better understand the system by disaggregating it and examining its components individually in terms of their roles, functions, characteristics, and effects on the whole. Kindermann's synoptic approach also treats units of action as systems with internal structures. In this sense, a monocentric (monozentrisch) sociopolitical system is a social formation composed of constituent elements that manifests itself as a purposive unit (Kindermann, 1991d, p. 27). Relations among the elements and between these elements and the whole operate through communication, interaction, functional interdependence, and complementarity. A system can be distinguished analytically as a discrete entity from its surrounding environment, while remaining susceptible to environmental influences and capable of influencing that environment. Its elements perform particular tasks and functions within a division of labor, while its structure consists of the purposive arrangement of those elements.

The units comprising the international system are themselves systems. Such a system possesses a central executive organ—a government—that evaluates information received from within and without, takes decisions, and has as its fundamental task the preservation of the system's existence. Beyond this monocentrically organized action-unit system lies world politics, the system constituting its wider environment. Unlike a monocentric system, world politics is open rather than closed and polycentric (polizentrisch), lacking a centrally organized executive organ. This polycentric international system consists of coexistence, mutual dependencies, and interactions (Interaktion) among monocentrically organized action systems and the groups they form.

Perception and the interpretation of power

Kindermann identifies the psychological dimension as one of neorealist theory's important characteristics (Kindermann, 1991d, p. 29). This emphasis is necessary above all because states, their decision-makers, political parties, decision-making processes, and other principal elements of international politics cannot be directly 'experienced' in their entirety by the researcher; rather, they must be apprehended through reasoning. The scholar can therefore comprehend objective political reality in international relations only subjectively and selectively. Kindermann draws the following methodological implications: the plurality of perspectives must be investigated, and the divergent perceptions, understandings of interest, and methods of situational assessment employed by the decision-makers of the action systems within each constellation must be incorporated into the analysis. For pedagogical and methodological purposes, the Munich School recommends exercises termed learning analyses: simulated analyses of past constellations through which different perceptions of the same problem structure can be examined (Kindermann, 1991d, p. 29).

When capabilities become politically salient

Power and interest are closely interwoven in the vocabulary of classical realism. According to Morgenthau, the close relationship between power and interest establishes politics as an autonomous sphere of human conduct and, as discussed above, assigns power a function analogous to money or profit in economics. Given the theoretical role played by power in Morgenthau's classical realism, Kindermann suggests that Political Science—and International Relations—could, in the classical realist sense, legitimately be described as the science of power (Kindermann, 1991d, p. 15). He criticizes this reduction, however, rejecting Morgenthau's reduction of politics to power and offering an alternative functional definition of politics through four categories.

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The first category concerns the domestic function of politics. Politics, in this sense, is public decision-making conduct that is contingent upon circumstances (situationsbedingt), connected to value judgments, and capable of learning (lernfähig). Its task is to sustain the legitimate regulation of public affairs within a state organization in complex societies characterized by a division of labor; to plan and defend that regulatory function; and to organize relations with external political systems. The second category defines foreign policy. Foreign policy consists of the situationally contingent, interest-related, and learning-capable decision-making conduct of decision-makers and competent organs in the relations of their own state, or another system, with other states and action systems in international politics. This conduct seeks the most effective identification and assertion of interests as defined by decision-makers. Unlike classical realism, this conception emphasizes the perception of interests and the adoption of the most rational decisions appropriate to the circumstances, rather than simply asserting interests. Objective interests are thus replaced by relativized perceptions of interest. The subjective dimension—how the decision-makers of actors or subsystems perceive the constellation—acquires importance. The third category defines international politics as a multilayered, polycentric, and dynamic system of interaction lacking a central decision-making and authoritative organ and a coercively enforceable legal order. Its structure and dynamics arise from foreign-policy interactions and relational systems among coexisting action systems whose interdependence is variable (variable-interdependent): monocentrically organized states and other system types. The fourth category concerns international relations. This concept encompasses socially significant nonpolitical relations and transnational relations across states and borders among institutions, states, and national communities, including commercial and cultural relations (Kindermann, 1991b, pp. 70–80, 1991d, p. 17).

Through these definitions, Kindermann dispenses with the conception of interest oriented toward power in Morgenthau's sense, and other concepts fill the resulting conceptual space. What becomes central is political decision-making conduct within the monocentrically organized social systems defined above, directed toward their survival. Political decision-making conduct is observable in all complex societies irrespective of their political systems. In this respect, it should occupy a central place in Political Science and International Relations.

Kindermann accepts that the classical realist conception of power can be applied to the foreign policies of historically expansionist and aggressive states—for example, German foreign policy under the National Socialist dictatorship. He nevertheless maintains that this aggressive-expansionist conception cannot be treated as a universally typical priority of foreign-policy conduct. He grounds this claim in the observation that the foreign-policy conduct of many states does not conform to classical realism's model of conflictual, expansionist power accumulation. From this, Kindermann concludes that power, understood as a drive, cannot constitute the fundamental cause and ultimate objective of political conduct. Instead, he describes power as a political reality arising from a plurality of wills and desires and from struggles or conflicts of interest. More fundamentally, he understands it as a generally unavoidable instrument of survival and self-realization, assuming different forms and directed toward either defense or aggression. Although he adopts Max Weber's classical definition of power, Kindermann qualifies it by insisting that power must be assigned a role specific to the international constellation under analysis (Kindermann, 1991d, p. 19). Power must always be assessed in terms of the role it performs and its interdependence with the other components of the constellation.

Kindermann argues that the concept of interest as employed in Morgenthau's realist theory cannot be sustained scientifically. Morgenthau understands interest as the optimal objective discernible by a rational decision maker within a political process, together with the selection of the means required to achieve it, and speaks of objective interests. For Kindermann, however, an objective conception of interest cannot be demonstrated in social-scientific terms. Although he retains interest as a central concept of neorealist theory, he modifies and relativizes it. Interest acquires meaning through objectives or orientations toward objectives that are related to circumstances, perceptions, and value judgments. Interests must therefore be understood subjectively.

In defining the international system, the Munich School broadly converges with classical realism's assumptions. Because no center of power stands above states, or subjects acting as closed units of action, with the capacity to supervise them and impose sanctions—in other words, because a coercively enforceable international legal order is absent—the international system, or international politics, constitutes a multilayered and polycentric system of interaction without a central governing element. States within this system lack a guaranteed framework of legal protection. Rather than functioning as an authority that enforces international law, the United Nations and other international organizations symbolize and institutionalize dialogue among decision-makers and leaders of states from all regions of the world. International organizations formed around security policies, such as NATO, and supranational structures such as the European Union are platforms states use to identify their interests more effectively.

The most important analytical term in Kindermann's work and in the Munich School's terminology is constellation. This concept plays a central role in the School's synoptic method of analysis. For Kindermann, a constellation, or constellation analysis, concerns the polycentric system of interaction constituted by units of action—predominantly states—participating in the international environment during a particular period

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(Kindermann, 1989, p. 103). Every constellation possesses a central problem structure bearing upon the conduct of the units of action within it. For the Munich School, the analysis of international politics is synoptic constellation analysis.

Constellation analysis as an explanatory procedure

One of Kindermann's foundational concepts is constellation, a term borrowed from astronomy. Deriving from the Latin stella, meaning star, and the prefix con, the term refers to a grouping or cluster of stars. It denotes a configuration produced by particular conditions, phenomena, and events—a system possessing a processual character—and can accordingly be operationalized in international relations. States acting within a regional constellation, for example, form a grouping or system among themselves. Each constellation possesses distinctive characteristics, and relations also exist among constellations. Numerous individual subconstellations can be identified. Constellation is therefore potentially preferable to the frequently employed concept of region because it offers greater analytical operability.

Kindermann identifies the methodological operationalization of neorealist theory as one of the Munich School's principal priorities. Building on neorealist theory, he offers a concrete method for analyzing international political constellations, intended for theorists and scholars of international politics as well as practitioners in this social sphere—explicitly including political decision-makers.

The analytical procedure Kindermann calls the synoptic method, or constellation analysis seeks to understand and explain a complex whole by dividing it into components or subsystems and investigating their respective structures, characteristics, and relations of influence: their interdependencies and interactions. Synoptic derives from the Greek synopsis and denotes the joint consideration of the components of a whole. The components selected for investigation are determined by hypotheses concerning their relative significance for the whole.

Hynek and Šenk (2026, p. 13) describe the procedure as beginning with the historical delimitation of a constellation, proceeding to examine relevant factors for each actor, and culminating in an analysis of how those factors interact. This procedure makes it possible to ask why actors occupying the same constellation may interpret a change in the distribution of power differently and respond in different ways.

The theoretical roots of the synoptic method lie in the work of Arnold Bergstraesser, Kindermann's teacher and one of the principal founders and pioneers of postwar German Political Science. Its fundamental assumption is that political phenomena must be examined holistically. Domestic and foreign political phenomena, in particular, must be studied with due regard for their interdependence (Bergstraesser, 1961, p. 26). According to the Munich School, a deductive approach cannot provide a scientific analysis of highly complex international constellations without the synoptic method. The knowledge obtained by analyzing each constituent part does not amount simply to the discovery and classification of additional pieces of information. The synthesis produced by integrating and evaluating this accumulated knowledge in relation to the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Kindermann therefore conceives of 'synoptic Political Science' as an integrative discipline. Its task is to generate typological knowledge in a social-scientific sense through systematic comparisons and analyses of political conduct across epochs and cultures (Kindermann, 1989, p. 100).

In conducting an analysis, the researcher investigates and structures complex bodies of factual material within five diagnostic fields of inquiry of equal standing. These correspond to the following paired analytical categories, followed by a synopsis.

The five component analyses below pose distinct questions about the same constellation. The synthesis then brings their findings together to explain the outcome and identify where the evidence leaves rival explanations open.

1. System and decision

At this stage, international action systems—states, alliances, multinational corporations, and so forth—are analyzed in terms of their structures and functions, particularly their foreign-policy decision-making processes and the interactions and relations among foreign-policy decision-making centers understood as subsystems. Within states, decision-making processes and centers are continually subject to both internal tensions within society and the state and international influences originating outside the system.

2. Interest and power

Interests are determinants that orient political conduct and potentially generate action. In this capacity, they directly shape constellation structures in international relations: shared interests, for example, give rise to cooperation, whereas opposed interests trigger conflictual conduct. Interest cannot be considered independently of power. Power likewise plays an important role in how international action systems conduct themselves in relation to their interests. Actual or potential power capabilities and the power relations among action systems are

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decisive in the formation of interests. Power can be considered in political, economic, military, and ideological terms; in fact, it represents a composite that emerges and takes shape across all these dimensions. Power within a constellation is always relative: it acquires analytical meaning only in comparison with other action systems within that constellation. All participating action systems must therefore be incorporated into the analysis from the perspectives of both interest and power.

3. Perception and reality

Assessments of the international situation made by the decision-making centers of states and other systems are invariably subjective. Each participating system's decision-makers perceive the reality of the constellation differently and subjectively, and their perceptions are partly accurate and partly mistaken. Among the foremost determinants of these divergent perceptions of reality are differences in decision-makers' historical experiences, learning processes, and worldviews. Because political decision-makers' subjective modes of perception and assessment shape and generate their political conduct within a constellation, the determinants of these subjective orientations must be investigated in order to improve understanding of the conduct that may be expected from each participant in the future (Kindermann, 1989, p. 106).

Perception refers primarily to information-processing operations that occur outside conscious control. These processes generate conscious images of perceived reality. Knowledge, perception, and reality are interconnected: perceptions create subjective images of reality and thereby provide a conception of what reality is. Incoming information is interpreted, structured, and organized so that it corresponds to the perceiving individual's worldview. In international relations, perceptions are selective, subjective assessments of the foreign-policy environment that actors accept as reality. They are relatively stable. Perceptions and the images formed on their basis underpin political choices in foreign-policy decision-making and thus also provide the foundation for foreign-policy conduct and interaction.

The concrete actions, institutions, organizations, and relations studied by International Relations cannot be apprehended visually—that is, solely through observation—or examined in their entirety through direct experience. As elements of a social sphere, they are apprehended through thought processes and mental representations (Kindermann, 1991c, p. 148). States, systems of government, political parties, revolutions, alliance structures, and international crises, for example, can be grasped only through such representations. Both the construction and the alteration of reality are involved. Incoming information passes through a perceptual filter (Kindermann, 1991c, p. 149). The resulting whole consists of components: informational content, opinions, assessments, and related elements combine to form an overall representation. The formation of perceptions affects how externally received information is interpreted, structured, and organized within the recipient's knowledge system. Subjective mental images are thereby produced (Kindermann, 1991c, p. 148).

The social reality that emerges through social interaction cannot be a singularity. Situations cannot therefore be regarded as identical, objective realities comparable to photographic images; rather, the analogy is to a painting on canvas. Unlike a photograph, a painting requires interpretation, and different viewers may perceive and understand different things in the same image. Social reality similarly emerges through human participation, interactions, and chains of conduct set in motion by other conduct. Because it is perceived differently by the various parties participating in a network of social relations, it remains open to interpretation, like a painting. A perception elicits a perception in another party; each newly formed perception becomes a further social action or reaction directed toward another recipient, where it in turn produces another perception. This spiral constitutes an extraordinarily complex social reality (Caman, 2006, pp. 136–141).

4. Conflict and cooperation

Units of action within a constellation possess different motivations and different capacities to exert influence, generating a particular configuration of forces. The dynamics arising from that configuration manifest themselves in various forms and phases of conflict and cooperation. International conflictual conduct rests on perceived differences of interest among units of action. If these differences are not merely potential and latent but actual and capable of orienting conduct, they generate processes of interaction that appear as varying forms of competition among objectives. Conflict ranges from tension and crisis to limited or unlimited war. Through appropriate conflict strategies shaped by the relationship between time and available means, units of action seek to impose their will, wholly or partly, upon their opponents. The analyst's task is to examine and interpret each unit's conflict strategies within the constellation in light of the previously identified structures of interest, power, and perception, while also considering their interactions and the supplementary factors shaping conduct. Endorsing Morgenthau's argument, Kindermann maintains that interstate conflicts frequently emerge when one state pursues strategies intended to alter the status quo while another state or states adopt foreign-policy conduct directed toward preserving it (Kindermann, 1991f, p. 127). Cooperative conduct rests on the same principles. For cooperation to arise, the units

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of action within a constellation must share advantages in power, military capabilities, economic resources, competitiveness, or related considerations. The analyst must establish which actors compete or cooperate with which others, why and how they do so, and what expectations, fears, and short-, medium-, and long-term objectives guide their decision-makers. The analysis must also identify the strategies and tactics used to pursue these objectives, the latent and overt contradictions in perception among the decision-makers of participating system units, and their possible consequences for the constellation's future. All these analyses must then be considered together in an effort to reach broader conclusions.

5. Norm and utility

By norm, Kindermann means the body of rules that establishes, in relative terms, what ought to occur in the international sphere. These rules consist particularly of international law, the law governing relations among states, and ideological and moral norms. Each international actor's foreign-policy conduct is subject to a multidimensional normative system shaped by international treaties and generally accepted rules of international law, whether codified in writing or established through accepted expectations of conduct. Every international constellation possesses a distinctive normative system. Existing norms, including treaty provisions, may also be interpreted differently by the units of action within a constellation (**Table 1**).

Prerequisites: Historical knowledge; regional and temporal delimitation; identification of basic problem structures; investigation of international influences.

Table 1

Constellation analysis

Basic analytical categories of neorealism	Questions addressed by the component analyses	Methodological fields of the component analyses
a. System and decision	Character of the system; processes of will formation and decision-makers within participating systems.	Systems theories; theories of governance and decision-making.
b. Perception and reality	Content of perceptions; the dependence of conduct on perceptions; differences and subjectivity in perceptions and situational analyses.	Social psychology; theories of perception and communication.
c. Interest and power	Goals, objectives, and means–ends relationships; motivations and capabilities; the structure and interdependence of the interest and power positions of action systems within the constellation.	Theories of interest, power, and equilibrium.
d. Cooperation and conflict	Interest-dependent forms of cooperative and conflictual conduct and the general behavioral strategies of action systems.	Theories of action, alliances, integration, peace, crises, and conflict.
e. Norm and utility	The guiding role and reciprocal tension between ideas and prescriptive norms (morality, law, ideology), on the one hand, and pragmatic utility, on the other; interpretation of the legal and normative conditions within and relevant to the constellation.	International law; political ethics; history of political thought; critique of ideology; sociology of knowledge.
Synopsis Knowledge through correlation and integration of the findings of component analyses a–e	Holistic assessment and structuring of the causal interdependencies arising from interactions among the components of the entire constellation, with particular attention to factors producing change and to international conditions.	Comparative systems theories of international politics; interdisciplinary research methods.

Note. Source: Kindermann (1991d, pp. 22–23).

Kindermann describes international norms as political morality. Political morality may shape foreign-policy conduct in various ways. For example, it may prevent or limit the harm states inflict upon other states as a consequence of conflict (Kindermann, 1991f, p. 130).

6. Synopsis

In the final stage of constellation analysis, the accumulated knowledge, findings, and diagnoses derived from each of the diagnostic fields outlined above are evaluated holistically in relation to one another and integrated into a causally explicable nexus of effects. At the beginning of the analysis, the analyst is required to consider the constellation from the perspective of the decision-makers of each participating action system. At the synopsis stage, the analyst develops and articulates an independent assessment.

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An illustrative comparison: One buildup, two responses

Consider three hypothetical states. State C expands the range and readiness of its conventional strike forces. State A depends on C for a security guarantee and has an established record of operational coordination with it. State B has a standing territorial dispute with C and no comparable mechanism for consultation. The change in C's capabilities is the same event for both observers. Its military implications may still vary with geography, basing, and exposure, which the analyst must establish independently. The comparison begins by asking what remains to be explained after those differences are taken into account.

A's leaders might interpret the deployment as an increase in the credibility of C's guarantee and deepen coordination rather than undertake an independent buildup. B's leaders might infer that C now has more credible coercive options and respond by dispersing forces or seeking a security partner. Those responses are plausible consequences of different assessments, not deductions from the assumed relationships. A might instead fear entrapment, and B might regard accommodation as less costly than balancing. By specifying the alternatives, the comparison makes clear where additional information is needed before attributing a policy to threat perception.

The system-and-decision analysis would first identify who was exposed to the new capabilities and which officials or institutions had authority over the response. The interest-and-power analysis would then establish how the two governments ranked their objectives and what options they could realistically pursue. Both governments might value security while assigning different weight to alliance credibility, freedom of maneuver, or the risk of escalation. Comparing procurement capacity, existing deployments, and formal obligations would help establish whether materially or institutionally different options were sufficient to account for divergent responses in a corresponding empirical case.

The perception-and-reality analysis would compare those constraints with contemporaneous assessments. For A, relevant evidence would include consultation records, operational planning, and private assessments of whether C was willing and able to honor its guarantee. For B, it would include intelligence estimates, internal discussions of C's intentions, and records showing which policy options became more or less credible after the buildup. Public statements could supplement this evidence, but their audience and strategic purpose would matter. If B chose to balance, an explanation based on increased threat perception would also need evidence of the leaders' assessments before the decision.

The remaining components ask how initial choices affected the wider relationship. A's closer coordination with C could reinforce B's view that the deployment was directed against it. A credible consultation mechanism could instead qualify that inference. Domestic legal constraints or alliance commitments could also rule out options that leaders otherwise preferred. The synopsis would integrate these findings into a sequence and compare it with competing accounts. A perceptual explanation would gain support from records linking a changed assessment to officials' ranking of the available responses before the decision. An unchanged assessment coupled with a newly feasible military option would point toward a different account. Where the evidence does not distinguish these possibilities, the result is an unresolved explanation rather than a finding that perceptions caused the outcome.

DISCUSSION

Analytical results and empirical relevance

The hypothetical comparison yields two propositions. First, a third state's buildup can carry different political implications for governments with different prior relationships to that state. Improved strike capabilities could increase the credibility of a guarantee for one government and sharpen the prospect of coercion for another. Second, even governments that agree on the threat can choose different policies if their exposure, commitments, or available options differ. These propositions imply different evidentiary tests. The first calls for records showing when officials revised their assessments of intentions or commitments and what policy options they reconsidered as a result. The second calls for evidence about the options actually open to governments that held similar threat assessments. Both tests require the analyst to establish the military implications of the buildup independently of what officials believed.

Research on Finland's and Sweden's NATO applications illustrates why analysts should trace how officials assessed the threat and which responses were feasible at the time. Savolainen (2024) traces different initial responses to Russia's invasion followed by convergence on the decision to apply for membership. Her comparison suggests that a study coded only at the point of application would obscure the decisions that need explaining. Pesu and Iso-Markku (2024) show that Finland's move involved both a judgment that informal arrangements were insufficient and a change in public support for formal membership. For constellation analysis, the implication is that the judgment about existing security arrangements and the domestic feasibility of accession must each be traced. The invasion was a common precipitating event. Each country's relationship to the threat, its prior alignment, and the decision process through which accession became viable are separate matters for empirical

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inquiry. The published cases illustrate different paths to the same decision. Assessing whether perceptions were decisive in either case would require tracing how officials ranked feasible options before applying.

Contribution to realist theory

The analysis takes as its starting point Waltz's distinction between a theory of international politics and a theory of foreign policy (Waltz, 1996). Structural realism directs attention to recurrent constraints and incentives generated by the distribution of capabilities. Kindermann's procedure extends the inquiry to how specific governments interpret a change and choose from the options then available (Kindermann, 1989, 1991f). The distinctive contribution lies in the evidentiary sequence. Before assigning causal weight to perception, the analyst establishes the material military implications of the change, reconstructs the alternatives understood to be available, and examines assessments recorded before the decision. This procedure specifies how a case study can examine the role of ideas in deliberation (Meibauer, 2020) and the historical context of a decision (Meibauer, 2023) within the broader Munich School approach described by Hynek and Šenk (2026). Rohde (2026) also offers a recent application of Munich School neorealism to the war in Ukraine.

The analysis also qualifies two possible inferences. An observed act of balancing gives limited grounds for inferring a prior increase in perceived threat because an existing threat assessment can produce a new policy once a previously unavailable option becomes viable. Likewise, counting the factors in a constellation gives little purchase on their causal importance. A stronger account shows how an assessment affected the ranking of alternatives and identifies a rival sequence that would account for the same decision. If changed assessments and changed options occur together and the evidence cannot distinguish their effects, the explanation should preserve that uncertainty.

Meier-Walser emphasizes that neorealism cannot be reduced to Waltz (Meier-Walser, 1994, as cited in Schörnig, 2003, p. 80). Nevertheless, it may be argued that Kindermann's neorealism has, in certain respects, insufficiently distanced itself from Morgenthau's realist approach. Schörnig observes that the Munich School's neorealism remains more faithful to Morgenthau's classical realism than does Waltz's theory (Schörnig, 2003, p. 80). Siedschlag (2001, pp. 39–40) argues that later work in the Munich School engaged more directly with newer systems theory, while Kindermann retained some of Morgenthau's reservations about systems-theoretical approaches.

Realism should not be confused with *Realpolitik*. Contrary to the underlying logic of *Realpolitik*, realism is not a theoretical approach that endorses, still less legitimizes, power (Siedschlag, 2001, p. 14). The Munich School's neorealism can be understood as one theoretical perspective within a pluralist discipline. It should be remembered that, as in every social-scientific discipline, theories in Political Science and International Relations contribute to the investigation and elucidation of political reality by providing general orientations for scholarly inquiry. Theoretical and methodological plurality should therefore be accepted as inherent in the nature of these social sciences. It should be valued as an intellectual resource rather than treated as a deficiency, both in the formulation of scholarly problems and in the differing hierarchies of importance evident in approaches to those problems. Through its integrative orientation and its openness to methodological pluralism, Kindermann's neorealism incorporates concerns accorded priority by different theoretical approaches within the discipline. In doing so, it has made an important methodological contribution and merits sustained theoretical and methodological attention.

Limitations and future research

The hypothetical design identifies plausible mechanisms and evidence that could distinguish them. Estimates of their frequency or relative importance require comparative research. The Finnish and Swedish decisions enter this discussion through published studies. In original case research, restricted access to internal deliberations can limit what analysts infer about officials' private views. Future research could compare governments facing the same deployment and match cases as closely as possible on military exposure while varying prior security relationships. Dated intelligence assessments, cabinet records, planning documents, and interviews could help establish whether assessments changed before officials reordered their options. Researchers should also include cases where assessments changed while policy stayed stable. Such cases can show when alliance obligations, domestic institutions, or limited resources prevent revised judgments from becoming policy.

Implications for research and practice

Record separately what a military change enables, what officials believe it signals, and which responses their government can implement.

Compare the timing of assessments, deliberations, and policy changes to test whether a new interpretation altered the choice among feasible options.

When assessing deterrence or reassurance, examine how partners and adversaries are likely to read the same action in light of their existing commitments and disputes.

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CONCLUSION

The same change in military capabilities can produce divergent foreign policies because governments face different material consequences, interpret the change in light of different relationships, and choose among different feasible options. Kindermann's constellation analysis helps explain this divergence by linking systemic conditions to concrete decisions and by showing how to assess the contribution of each factor. The five diagnostic fields trace how decision procedures, interests and capabilities, perceptions, interactions, and norms enter the explanation. The hypothetical buildup clarifies two distinct paths to divergence. Governments can assign different meanings to the same action, and they can agree about the threat while differing in their ability or willingness to respond.

The published studies show that Finland and Sweden took different paths toward applying to NATO after Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Pesu & Iso-Markku, 2024; Savolainen, 2024). To explain a response, establish the military consequences, reconstruct the government's assessment, and identify its feasible options. A documented change in how officials ranked those options after revising their assessment supports a perceptual explanation. Ambiguous evidence leaves the relative weight of perception and material constraints open.

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Ethical statement

This study is based exclusively on publicly available scholarly literature and documents and did not involve human participants, personal data, or any form of human subject research. Therefore, ethical approval and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval were not required under the applicable institutional guidelines.

Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Author contributions

The author was solely responsible for the conception and design of the study, data collection, analysis and interpretation, manuscript preparation, revision, and final approval of the submitted version.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of publicly available scholarly literature cited throughout the article.

AI disclosure

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used to assist with language editing, stylistic refinement, and improving the clarity and presentation of the manuscript. The author was responsible for all conceptual development, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of the findings, and the final content of the manuscript.

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