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Security Strategies of Small States in a Changing World

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Abstract: How are small states adjusting to a changing security environment and managing tensions with greater powers in their neighbourhood? Much of the recent literature on small states spends a great deal of time examining challenges to small states and their security policies. Scholars offer several strategies that small states can employ to adjust to a changing security landscape. Small states have two broad options – to focus on their own defence posture, trying to keep their autonomy and stay neutral, or use different cooperative schemes – bandwagon with larger powers, form alliances against dominant powers, or seek shelter and develop hedging strategies. This article reviews survival strategies employed by small states and provides a basis to better understand the behaviour of small states in today's contested security environment.

Keywords: small state, security strategies, alliance, neutrality, autonomy, influence, hedging.

1 Introduction

The question of what strategies small states tend to employ to navigate the international system has been widely debated since the end of the Cold War. Changes in the international system following the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in the creation of many independent states that have become new players in international relations. A growing number of small states have generated an increased interest in the foreign policy behaviour of small states and their capacity to adapt to an evolving geopolitical landscape. Since the end of the Cold War, small states in central and eastern Europe have enjoyed peace and stability, as there has been no fear of invasion or extinction. Growing interdependence and the transformed geopolitical environment have reduced the risk of military incursions and widened the room to manoeuvre in terms of foreign policy for small states. With the growing importance of international organizations, small states have also gained new opportunities to exercise their influence and act more independently in the international arena.

However, the last three years have been a turbulent period in international politics. Russia's burgeoning assertiveness and annexation of Crimea, the first change by force of Europe's borders in decades, has refocused attention on traditional security concerns. Small European states have started reassessing their security strategies as they have once again found themselves facing a fundamentally altered strategic environment. To respond to emerging challenges, small European states in the Baltic Sea region and Central Europe have begun reviewing their security policies and adopting new measures to tackle emerging insecurities.

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There is immense academic debate on the choices concerning the security policy of small states. Small states differ from greater powers in many aspects which influence their security policy decisions and ability to achieve favourable foreign policy outcomes. Furthermore, while small states have largely been treated as equals in the post-Cold War era, most are not powerful enough to navigate the security landscape independently (Inbar and Sheffer, 1997). Their freedom of action depends on the geographic and geopolitical setting, domestic conditions, economic development, membership of international organizations and even social cohesion.

Small states not only differ from bigger states, but also among themselves. Despite sharing similar characteristics, small states themselves do not necessarily pursue the same foreign policies. Differences exist in their perceptions, domestic and international conditions, interests and motives behind their decisions, resulting in varied foreign policy strategies in different parts of the globe (Gigleux, 2016). Switzerland, as a small state, enjoys a high degree of autonomy while at the same time remains neutral (Graf and Lanz, 2013). Comparatively, the three Baltic countries have employed fundamentally different foreign policy strategies in order to operate in the Baltic Sea region (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). Over the years, the Nordic countries have also developed different security approaches. The Cold War revealed deep security differences between the Nordic countries, with Denmark and Norway deciding to balance against the Soviet Union, and Finland staying neutral (Archer, 2014). Denmark also chose to advance its international status and security through active participation in international missions and "high alliance loyalty to the US" while Norway and Finland emphasized security through defence of their homelands (Archer, 2014).

To better understand distinct patterns of behaviour of the small states in a changing security environment, this article discusses different strategies that small states tend to employ to address their insecurities. It also provides a brief overview of theoretical discussions on how to define state smallness and how it relates to the needs and motives in terms of choosing one or another security policy strategy.

2 Defining a small state

Defining a small state is important in order to identify its main challenges and to explain its foreign policy decisions. However, wide academic debate on the definition of a small state obfuscates a definitive answer. Historically, small states were regarded as those states that were not great powers, in other words, too weak to make any difference in international order or change the rules of it (Archer, Bailes and Wivel, 2014). In this regard, small states have been characterized as "a weaker part in an asymmetric relationship, which is unable to change the nature or functioning of the relationship on its own" (Archer, Bailes and Wivel, 2014). Such a "weakness" of a small state is attributed to its quantitative characteristics, namely the small size of the territory, population, economy or very limited military capability. Jaquet noted that "a small state is a state that is neither on a global nor regional scale able to impose its political will or protect its national interests by exerting power politics" (Jaquet, 1971). In other words, a small state is unable to defend its national interests by its own political or military means.

Material factors are commonly used to define a small state. However, the authors see size as a relative term, arguing that a capability-based definition alone does not tell us much about state size and how it relates to its foreign policy behaviour. For example, Denmark is a small state in NATO, but a great power in relation to the Baltic States (Wivel, 2014). Traditional material power sources such as military capabilities or a strong economy are significant factors defining the challenges and limitations of small states, but insufficient to explain their foreign policies. Historical or geographical contexts are also important, especially if they determine asymmetric relationships (Jurkynas, 2014). The strategic environment also modifies security agendas of small states since they are located in different areas with different neighbours and face different problems. Furthermore, size does not prevent small states from being active or exercising their influence in international politics. Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, despite being small, are active participants of international military operations (Šešelgytė, 2013). Small states can also bring important

issues to the table and exert their influence within international organizations by advocating particular issues. Lithuania, for example, has been very active in advocating sanctions against Russia despite being a weaker party in this asymmetric relationship.

Robert Keohane suggested an alternative definition of a small state based on perceived security capability when the state's elite does not expect to make an impact acting alone or in a small group (Keohane, 1969). This definition on its own is subjective, but as Thorhallson and Wivel noted, in combination with other material factors, it can help to form a more accurate definition of a small state (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006). A similar definition was suggested by Rothstein, who described small powers as states which recognize that they are not capable of obtaining security without relying on other states, institutions or processes. This inability to rely on their own capabilities must also be recognized by other states (Rothstein, 1969, p. 29).

Wivel and Mouritzen described smallness as based on a state's ability to exercise its power. According to them, small states are "stuck with the power configuration and its institutional expression, no matter what their specific relation to it is", meaning that small states cannot change the condition of policy-making. Should great powers in international organizations change their policy on particular issues? This would affect the conditions for policy-making, whereas the influence of small states is limited (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006). Knudsen claimed that relationships, not size, are the decisive factors which can explain power disparities and determine smallness under certain conditions (Knudsen, 1996).

Ultimately, there is no commonly agreed upon definition of a small state because there is always some relativism involved in the discussion. The term small state is defined both by its power relationship to its environment and quantitative factors which determine the challenges, limitations and abilities of small states to exercise their influence and independently make security policy choices.

3 The needs and challenges of small states

The needs of small states can help to better understand their foreign-policy strategies. Depending on domestic and international conditions, small states choose policies that best reflect their needs and help to achieve favourable foreign-policy goals.

Small states face many challenges, some of which are crucial to their existence. In addition to traditional military threats, small states today also face non-traditional security challenges such as terrorism, environmental disasters, hybrid threats, cyber attacks or economic and social vulnerabilities. A wide range of challenges require capabilities to cope with them, which small states usually lack in absolute or relative terms. They have smaller economies and militaries, limited diplomatic resources, suffer from various economic or political dependencies, and have less means of dealing with more powerful states. According to Goetschel, the security dilemma of a small state consists of two elements – influence and autonomy. Small states seek both to increase their influence and to maintain their autonomy. Given existing conditions, small states choose policies which best reflect their needs - either a more passive, neutral role or active engagement (Goetschel, 1998). However, enhancing influence does not always lead to an increase in their autonomy or vice versa. Small countries may not be equally involved in decision-making or be forced to participate in international actions which do not correspond to their objectives or values which may lead to the loss of autonomy or influence. As a result, security and influence are two things that most small states lack and want to achieve (Sherwood, 2016).

As noted by Thorhallsson, small states need a peaceful international system and security guarantees of powerful states or organizations to survive (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). A number of academic publications underline the importance of international organization as a means to increase the security and influence of small states. Since small states face greater external threats in comparison to bigger states, a rules and norms-based international order provides them with more stability while security guarantees of greater powers and organizations compensate for their lack of security and allow for some degree of foreign-policy independence. Additionally, international organizations, if based on equal membership,

also serve as a platform to exercise the influence of small states by "putting them on a diplomatic and legal footing with larger states" (Sherwood, 2016).

Small states also face economic insecurities which shape their foreign policy goals. They suffer from diseconomies of scale in production and distribution, exposure to high levels of risk due to small populations and a limited capacity to negotiate with larger powers (Venner, 2009). Small states are also unlikely to develop a wide diversity of supply sources, or become victims of economic sanctions and pressures imposed on their domestic structures making them even more vulnerable to and dependent on external actors. Consequently, to meet their economic security needs small states need access to an open global economy and free trade, which is sometimes limited.

Acknowledging limitations and challenges faced by small states and how those challenges relate to their smallness leads to another question concerning which strategies small states tend to apply to compensate for their shortages and meet their needs.

4 Security strategies of small states

There are several strategies that small states employ to achieve greater stability and security, and gain more influence in relation to other actors. Small states can either *engage* with great powers, *balance against* potential threats, develop *hedging strategies* or stay *neutral*. Small states can also seek shelter. Each of these strategies follows the same objective to obtain more security and also reflects different circumstances and the vulnerabilities of small states.

4.1 Alliances as responses to threats

In their discussion on the behaviour of small states, Thorhallsson, Steinsson and Lake argue that small states tend to "subordinate themselves to dominant states" and, therefore, either align with threatening powers (bandwagoning) or join alliances to balance against powerful actors (balancing).These behavioural expectations originate from traditional theories concerning international relations that rest on the assumption that small states are subject to the anarchic structure of the international system. Consequently they are forced to align with greater powers to obtain greater levels of security (Rothstein, 1969). Alliances can be bilateral or multilateral, consisting of both small and great powers. Lake argued that small states willingly subordinate themselves to another in order to obtain more protection and order, since they can benefit from hierarchical relations in three ways: enhanced security and territorial integrity, defined property rights at home and abroad by reducing risks of potential disputes, and set standards of international behaviour (Lake, 2009).

According to proponents of the traditional alliance theory, states tend to employ two broad strategies when confronted with threats – either to align with weaker allies to balance against the potential aggressor or align with the threatening power and bandwagon. Both of these strategies are based on available capabilities.

Balancing is more likely to happen if the capability of a rising power is accompanied by geographical proximity, offensive actions or intentions. There are two factors which motivate small states to choose this strategy. First, small states join weaker powers before they become a potential threat. Secondly, joining the weaker side boosts their influence within the alliance due to a greater need for assistance (Walt, 1985). Weaker states are also more likely to balance when they are threatened by powers of equal capabilities, and bandwagon when they face greater powers.

Following the bandwagoning school of thought, small states choose to align with the fast emerging power instead of balancing against it and accepting subordination in exchange for profit (Kuik, 2008). This happens because small states generally bring little value to a balancing coalition; therefore, bandwagoning can be seen as a more reasonable option to minimize their security risks. The authors identified several

conditions under which small states are more likely to bandwagon. Firstly, the weaker the state is, the more likely it is to bandwagon in order to minimize potential costs of losing. Secondly, small states choose to bandwagon when allies are unavailable and the state is directly threatened. Finally, states bandwagon in exchange for mutual benefits (Walt, 1990). Small states in close proximity to the threat might be the first victims, so aligning with the aggressor can help to minimize their losses (Walt, 1990).

Alliances usually bring together members with similar strategic interests and ideologies and are mutually reinforcing (Walt, 1997). Alliances can be defensive or offensive, intended to attack a third party or aimed at defending its members in case they are attacked. Modern Alliances such as NATO are highly institutionalized with a formal collective commitment to defend its member countries. Joining the alliance can help small states to exercise influence on particular foreign policy issues and advance their international status beyond neutrality or non-alignment. Weaker states join alliances to protect themselves from potential adversaries and increase stability. Belonging to a particular alliance also allows access to consultations and increases the chances of gaining political support and military assistance from other major partners (Shou and Brundtland, 1971). Alliances can also help with burden sharing by pooling resources that small states usually lack. In their discussion on the decisions by Belgium and the Netherlands to sign the Treaty of Brussels in 1948 and the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, Wiebes and Zeeman noted that despite different reasons of alignment, the two countries joined the two military alliances to pool their resources against a potential aggressor (Wiebes and Zeeman, 1993). Defensive alliances also increase the security and deterrence of small states because of their commitment to collective defence. Furthermore, alignment may also boost weak regimes or increase their sustainability. This applies to weaker states where internal instability motivates the political elite to align with stronger countries seeking to improve domestic stability (Walt, 1985). It should be noted, however, that joining alliances may also have its downsides. In exchange for protection, larger powers may limit the freedom of small states to manoeuvre politically, or put them under additional pressure by interfering with their domestic or foreign affairs (Bailes, Rickli and Thorhallsson, 2014).

NATO is the best example of a modern defensive alliance which was established in response to an emerging threat. Small European states saw it as the main security guarantee able to balance against a potential adversary. Based on common interests and values NATO unites 29 member states, of which one third are small states. NATO is a highly institutionalized framework with a collective defence commitment providing countries with clear benefits of membership. In this regard, NATO was seen by small states as both a potentially stronger power to balance against the adversary and as a platform to advance their international status.

4.2 Strategic Hedging

Great powers play a huge role in the risk management of small states. They provide small states with additional resources, military capabilities and political support. However, great powers might want to impose their political will on small states or even limit their freedom of action by adding them to their "sphere of influence". In this regard, how should small states act in order to avoid dangers from greater powers?

Besides the aforementioned strategies, there is another strategic option that small states can employ in relation to other powers – strategic hedging. Strategic hedging is defined as the "behaviour of a country pursuing the offsetting of risks by choosing multilateral policies with the intention of making mutually reactive effects" (Lee, 2017). This strategy aims to avoid one particular policy – balancing, bandwagoning or neutrality – and seeks to reduce the potential risk in relation to regional powers without confronting either of them (Sherwood, 2016). Strategic hedging is employed when states do not want to support either side or power, fearing that this could lead to higher security risks. This strategy falls in between balancing and bandwagoning, and must fulfill the following conditions to be successful. States which employ strategic hedging must not face threats from rising regional superpowers, and their security environment must not be based on a "rigid logic of a bloc", allowing some flexibility in terms of not being tied to

one side (Lee, 2017). A practical example of the implementation of such a strategy could be the case of Southeast Asian countries that, due to the direct influence of the United States and China, employ strategic hedging as the most frequent alternative security strategy option. This strategy allows them to maintain ties with both sides while not being tied to one particular power (Lee, 2017). Small states prefer hedging over balancing or bandwagoning due to several factors. Balancing can be strategically unnecessary and politically provocative or even counterproductive, leading to the loss of potential economic gains. It can also be politically risky and limit the freedom of action of small states (Kuik, 2008).

Having studied recent trends of security strategies employed by Southeast Asian countries, Kuik distinguished between several hedging strategies as alternatives to balancing or bandwagoning: indirect balancing, dominance denial, economic pragmatism, binding engagement and limited bandwagoning. All these strategies fall in between pure balancing (as rejection of a great power) and pure bandwagoning (as acceptance of a great power). *Indirect balancing* allows small states to reduce risks through military build-up and by forging military alliances. States upgrade their military capabilities without officially belonging to any defence cooperation treaty. *Dominance denial* uses regional political balance to prevent the emergence of a potential dominant country either individually, or collectively involving other powers in regional affairs. *Economic pragmatism* aims to maximize benefits through direct economic cooperation with great powers regardless of political tensions between them. This policy emphasizes neutrality and means neither acceptance nor rejection of power. *Binding engagement* is based on a binding reciprocal relationship with one or more parties. *Limited bandwagoning* occurs when a country selectively depends on or cooperates with great powers (Kuik, 2008). All Southeast Asian states maintain economic and diplomatic ties with China, however, this does not mean they are ready to accept the power ascendancy of China (in terms of political or military alignment) (Kuik, 2008). Pure balancing or bandwagoning is not always economically wise and can even prove risky; therefore, taking a middle position may be a strategically more suitable option.

4.3 Policy of Neutrality

Small states not willing to align with any of the powers might pursue a policy of neutrality. Neutrality, or non-alignment, can be defined as a "symmetric strategic relationship or strategic independence from both power poles" (Dahl, 1997). From a legal perspective, neutral states are required not to participate in wars or support parties militarily. They should also be ready to defend themselves in the case of violations of their territorial integrity or sovereignty (Goetschel, 1999).

For a long time the policy of neutrality was an alternative security policy concept for small states to secure their survival. Small states welcomed neutrality as an instrument to maintain their sovereignty and autonomy (Krasner, 1995). According to the realist perspective, the decision of a state not to wage war is aimed at increasing its chances of independence and territorial integrity. Small states adopt neutrality to avoid taking sides in great power conflicts, demonstrating that they do not pose any threat to greater powers thus minimizing their risk of being involved in the conflict. In this regard, neutrality has been perceived as a way to manage tensions with rising regional powers, and secure independence and sovereignty. For some states located in close proximity to hostile countries, neutrality may be the most conceivable option to alleviate tensions and ensure their own security (Thorhallsson and Steinsson, 2017). Finland, for instance, was one of those small European states which found themselves located between two great powers and, therefore, has decided to stay non-aligned. The policy of neutrality was aimed at ensuring room to manoeuvre while at the same time maintaining a good relationship with the Soviet Union (Tiilikainen, 1998). Since the participation of small states in power-related interactions could significantly increase their vulnerability and diminish their security, following a policy of neutrality could prevent war and preserve independence.

Small states in Western Europe had two broad options during the Cold War – either to join a military alliance like NATO or stay neutral. Both Sweden and Switzerland chose to stay neutral and formally continue to follow this policy today. However, some may argue that Sweden's participation in NATO's Partnership

for Peace (PfP) programme, its EU membership and active engagement in regional military exercises (such as Aurora 2017) indicate a slight shift in its policy of neutrality. Switzerland's policy of neutrality dates back to the sixteenth century and can be explained as a reaction against the domination of more powerful states in the neighbourhood (Morris and White, 2011). However, its policy of non-alignment did not mean that the country had not contributed to peace-building or that it had tried to isolate itself from being active in international affairs. Switzerland actively supported organizations working on peace-building and facilitation, and became a hub of international organizations working on crisis management. In Sweden, neutrality did not mean isolationism or passive participation in international affairs. A policy of neutrality served as a platform to export values and ideas. Neutral countries have significantly contributed to the de-escalation and prevention of conflicts (Goetschel, 2013). They can also play the role of mediators or draw attention to humanitarian crises (Morris and White, 2011).

As noted by Goetschel, since the end of the Cold War neutrality has disappeared *de facto* from the official discourse of security policy (Goetschel, 1999). The expansion of NATO and the European Union (hereinafter the EU) has greatly contributed to this process. For example, Sweden, Finland and Austria shifted their foreign policies and became members of the EU. Although none of these countries has joined NATO and militarily chosen to remain alliance-free, both Sweden and Finland are also very reliant on security assistance from other European powers and the US if the need arises.

4.4 Alliance Shelter Strategy

Small states need different capabilities to address the complexity of security challenges they are facing. This requires engagement with various actors and security suppliers to mitigate risks. In order to do this, small states may employ a shelter strategy (Bailes, Rickli and Thorhallsson, 2014). Bailes, Thayer and Thorhallsson criticized traditional alliance theory, offering a new concept of alliance "shelter" designed, as they put it, to better capture the needs of small states and explain their foreign policy behaviour. The authors argue that alliance theory is designed to explain the actions of great powers while the behaviour of small states might be caused by much more complex motivations (Bailes, Thayer and Thorhallsson, 2016).

Small states seek to reduce their social, economic or political vulnerability by aligning with great powers or joining international organizations. They need not only military but also economic or political assistance as well as access to innovations or modernization. The concept of alliance shelter differs from traditional alliance strategy in several aspects. First, it regards small states as completely different military and social units of the international system. Second, the alliance shelter theory emphasizes domestic aspects that lead to the alignment of states with larger states. Third, relative gain considerations might be irrelevant in the relationship between small states and their counterparts because mutually beneficial cooperation is not only based on power calculations. Fourth, small states need political, economic and societal shelter. Because of their size, small states tend to be more vulnerable to external factors such as reliance on foreign markets, trade or political changes abroad. Fifth, social and cultural relationships with the outside world help to avoid isolation, which endangers the existence and welfare of small states. Finally, a shelter alliance also involves transformative effects and costs on the social and political developments of small states. As seen through this prism, the alliance shelter relationship is neither based solely on subordination or annexation nor on equality or autonomy (Bailes, Thayer and Thorhallsson, 2016). Alliance shelter strategy demonstrates that small states need external shelter in multiple dimensions; not only in terms of hard security but also in other areas which are closely interlinked to the decision of a state to choose a particular foreign-policy strategy.

4.5 The Baltic States and the New Security Environment

The security of the Baltic States largely depends on external factors, primarily on the dominance of regional powers and their ability to leverage their impact on smaller neighbours. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are located in a common operational environment, facing a similar set of security threats and challenges. Those challenges are mostly related to Russia's dominance in the region and its assertive actions to increase its regional influence. To survive, the three Baltic States have employed different tools and strategies, the most important of which is the alliance security strategy.

After regaining their independence, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia chose not to remain alliance-free, and instead sought to integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions, namely NATO and the EU. The rationale for the security-policy choices of the Baltic States was driven by the desire to have "strategic shelters", guaranteeing their security and independence from the big neighbour in the East. NATO was seen as their primary security guarantor. Preparation for membership of NATO and the EU also encouraged them to develop closer trilateral defence cooperation (BALTBAT, BALTRON, BALTNET). Unfortunately, this deteriorated after they became members of the Alliance and the EU as Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia focused less on their own territorial or regional defence capabilities, and relied more on their commitment to collective defence (Molis, 2009).

After 2014, faced with growing tensions in the region, the three Baltic states started to readjust their security policies, focusing on strengthening their national defence capabilities: increasing defence spending, modernizing their militaries and increasing the resilience of their societies (Ministry of National Defense of the Republic of Lithuania, 2017). Particular attention has been paid to their bilateral defence cooperation with the United States, who has always been seen as the key ally in shoring up their national defence and deterrence posture. The evolving security environment in the neighbourhood encouraged the three Baltic states to intensify cooperation at the regional level and look for joint solutions on how to bolster their defence capabilities (Szymański, 2015). The Atlantic Alliance is, and will remain, the main Baltic defence security strategy, but other policy strategies such as regional cooperation and bilateral defence cooperation, or a bigger focus on building national defence capabilities have also been re-employed to adapt to a changing security environment.

5 Conclusion

Small states are exposed to a whole set of security challenges and influences that their counterparts lack and which determine their foreign-policy behaviour and security strategies. Because of their small size and limited capabilities to protect themselves militarily or economically, small states are much more vulnerable to both internal and external dynamics when compared with large powers. To gain more security and stability, as well as exercise more influence and meet their economic or political needs, small states either seek partners and allies or remain neutral. Each of the security strategies of the small states intends to increase their chances of survival but also carries certain risks. Moreover, small states differ not only from larger powers but also among themselves. Despite sharing similar characteristics of smallness, states tend to employ different security strategies. Depending on their geography, historical contexts and existing limitations in terms of capabilities and perceptions, they choose different patterns of foreign-policy behaviour. These may include balancing or bandwagoning, seeking shelter, strategic hedging or neutrality.

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