

SMALL STATES IN MODERN INTERNATIONAL MULTILATERAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

In modern international relations, states adopt strategies to confront security and other challenges. The strategies they choose, passive, defensive, or active, depend not only on resources but also on the ability of the political elite to correctly assess the international environment and find a balance between security, sovereignty, and development.

Given the disproportionate distribution of power in the field of international relations, small states are often compelled to avoid forceful confrontations and instead utilise diplomatic and multilateral cooperation tools. The international involvement of small states today is predominant, especially within the framework of the UN and other global and regional multilateral platforms, where the majority of member states are small states. These states can combine efforts and act as a collective voice, often promoting global agendas such as the fight against climate change, the goal of sustainable development, the protection of human rights, and the strengthening of peace.

Small states, despite their limitations, can become influential and proactive actors, provided they manage their internal resources wisely and develop a stable and flexible foreign policy. Their strength is not limited to material factors, but is based on strategic orientation, ideological cohesion, effective work with international partners, and institutional cooperation.

In international relations, especially in a multilateral format, the strength of a small state is measured not only by its size but also by its ability to act intelligently, persistently, flexibly, and purposefully. These states can act not only as consumers of security but also as peacemakers, disseminators of international norms, and bearers of joint actions to solve global challenges. Small states rely heavily on multilateral diplomacy, legal mechanisms, and niche diplomacy, which allow them to increase their political weight in international organisations without the resources of force.

Keywords: Small state, superpower, territory, population, sovereignty, economy, international organisation, region, security, multilateral format, foreign relations, cooperation.

ՓՈՔՐ ՊԵՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐՆ ԱՐԴԻ ՄԻՋԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ ԲԱԶՄԱԿՈՂՄ ՀԱՐԱԲԵՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐՈՒՄ

ՄՀԵՐ ՇԻՐԻՆՅԱՆ

ՀՀ Գիտությունների ազգային ակադեմիայի
փիլիսոփայության, սոցիոլոգիայի և իրավունքի ինստիտուտի հայցորդ
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Համառոտագիր

Ժամանակակից միջազգային հարաբերություններում պետությունները որդեգրում են անվտանգային և մյուս մարտահրավերներին դիմակայելու ռազմավարություններ: Նրանց ընտրած ռազմավարությունները՝ պասիվ, պաշտպանողական կամ ակտիվ, կախված են ոչ միայն ռեսուրսներից, այլև քաղաքական վերնախավի կարողությունից՝ ձիշտ գնահատելու միջազգային միջավայրն ու գտնելու հավասարակշռության կետը՝ անվտանգության, ինքնիշխանության և զարգացման միջև:

Միջազգային հարաբերությունների ոլորտում ուժերի անհամաչափ բաշխվածության պայմաններում փոքր պետությունները հաճախ ստիպված են լինում խուսափել ուժային առձակատումներից և կիրառել դիվանագիտական բազմակողմ համագործակցության գործիքներ: Փոքր պետությունների միջազգային ներգրավվածությունն այսօր փաստացի գերակշռող է հատկապես ՄԱԿ-ի և այլ գլոբալ ու տարածաշրջանային բազմակողմ հարթակների շրջանակներում, որտեղ անդամ երկրների մեծ մասը դասվում է փոքր պետությունների շարքը: Այս պետությունները կարողանում են համատեղել ջանքերը և հանդես գալ որպես կոլեկտիվ ձայն՝ հաճախ առաջ մղելով այնպիսի գլոբալ օրակարգեր, ինչպիսիք են կլիմայի փոփոխության դեմ պայքարը, կայուն զարգացման նպատակները, մարդու իրավունքների պաշտպանությունը և խաղաղության ամրապնդումը:

Փոքր պետությունները, չնայած իրենց սահմանափակումներին, կարող են դառնալ ազդեցիկ և նախաձեռնող դերակատարներ՝ պայմանով, որ ունակ են խելամիտ ձևով կառավարել իրենց ներքին ռեսուրսները և ստեղծել կայուն ու ձկուն արտաքին քաղաքականություն: Նրանց ուժը չի սահմանափակվում նյութական գործոններով, այլ հիմնվում է ռազմավարական կողմնորոշման, գաղափարական համախմբվածության, միջազգային գործընկերների հետ արդյունավետ աշխատանքի և ինստիտուցիոնալ համագործակցության վրա:

Հատկապես բազմակողմ ձևաչափում միջազգային հարաբերություններում փոքր պետության ուժը չափվում է ոչ միայն նրա մեծությամբ, այլև խելացի, համառ, ձկուն և նպատակաուղղված գործելու նրա

կարողությամբ: Այս պետությունները կարող են հանդես գալ ոչ միայն որպես անվտանգության սպառողներ, այլ նաև՝ որպես խաղաղարարներ, միջազգային նորմերի տարածողներ և գլոբալ մարտահրավերների լուծման համատեղ գործողությունների կրողներ: Փոքր պետությունները մեծապես ապավինում են բազմակողմ դիվանագիտությանը, իրավական մեխանիզմներին և նիշային (niche) դիվանագիտությանը, որոնք թույլ են տալիս նրանց բարձրացնել իրենց քաղաքական կշիռը միջազգային կազմակերպություններում՝ առանց ուժային ռեսուրսների:

Բանալի բառեր՝ փոքր պետություն, գերտերություն, տարածք, բնակչություն, ինքնիշխանություն, տնտեսություն, միջազգային կազմակերպություն, տարածաշրջան, անվտանգություն, բազմակողմ ձևաչափ, արտաքին կապեր, գործակցություն:

Introduction

In the modern world order, where global and regional political processes are shaped not only by the interaction of superpowers but also by medium and small states, the role and significance of the latter are increasing (Abrahamyan, 2024). For a long time, the theoretical discourse of international relations has been dominated by the analysis of large states, while small states have often been perceived as weak, with limited resources, devoid of political influence, and sometimes as units that hinder the stability of the international system (Cooper and Shaw, 2019, pp. 15–16). The aforementioned perceptions are evidenced by the fact that, to date, there is no unambiguous and universally accepted definition of the concept of “small state” in the professional literature. Small states have often been defined not by their characteristics, but by the properties that they do not possess. In European diplomacy, the concept of “small state” has been formed as a “residual category” between medium and microstates (Ingebritsen et al., 2006, p. 4).

Theoretical and Methodological Bases

By analysing the professional literature, two main approaches to the presentation of the concept of “small state” can be distinguished: the first approach considers the basis of classification as quantitative qualification, the second – qualitative (Tang, 2018, p. 38).

Quantitative qualification implies the territory of the state, the population, and minerals. The distribution of material power in the international system affects and defines the interaction and relations of states. A great power can adopt a more independent and active foreign policy, while a small state, lacking material capabilities, is more difficult to maintain economic development and ensure military security independently, which increases the risk of being exposed to changes in the external environment. It limits what

can be achieved and more confidently strengthens the international role and status of the country than any other factor in microstates (Ingebritsen et al., 2006, pp. 8-9).

Population is the most common method for determining the size of states. It is no coincidence that population size provides many advantages and creates many challenges. If a state has a small population, regardless of the size of its territory, whether it is Luxembourg or Greenland, and regardless of whether it is rich or poor, a small population creates certain challenges. A state with a small population cannot form a large military force, cannot defend itself from enemy attacks, and will depend on other states and international organisations for protection. Experts believe that a small state is considered a state with a population of up to one million. This approach is mainly used by the World Bank, which, in fact, recently increased this number to 1.5 million (there are 56 such states).

In this context, qualitative approaches to defining small states (political, economic, historical, cognitive, etc.) are more important. In this case, a state can be weak in one area, but at the same time strong in another. As Anders Wivel notes, “Power becomes clear in the relations between one or more states whose behaviour we want to explain.” (Archer et al., 2014, p. 34). It is also important to consider qualitative indicators such as the position of states in the global economy and politics, as well as their degree of political and economic independence.

Therefore, there is no clear definition of a small state. The definition depends on both quantitative (population, territory, and GDP) and qualitative (international role and influence) criteria. Qualitative approaches – the political influence of the state, economic independence, and international behaviour – are more important for the characterisation of a small state. The perception of smallness is relative and depends on the regional and global context, so the concept of a small state is always subject to comparison and subjective assessment.

A significant part of the member states of the United Nations are classified as small states. Despite their resource and geographical limitations, these states can employ sensible and purposeful foreign policy strategies to preserve their sovereignty, protect national interests, and exert influence on international platforms. Their active involvement and strategic manoeuvring in international organisations, diplomatic flexibility, and diversity of foreign policy behaviour are of essential importance in the process of shaping modern world politics.

The role of small states in international relations is emphasised by several circumstances: first of all, since the late 1960s, due to a sharp increase in their number as a result of decolonisation (Galstyan, 2019). Second, the

overwhelming majority of UN member states are small states (at least 108 out of 193 member states) (Krasnyak and Shaternikov, 2023). Third. their growing role in world politics since the second half of the 20th century, when they grew from “weak players” to “serious players” on the international stage, capable of imposing their own will and advancing national interests. The collapse of a polarised world, democratisation, trade liberalisation, and the digital revolution have also given small states greater freedom (Henrikson, 2023, p. 5). Therefore, although this group is extremely diverse, small states are simply too numerous and too important to ignore (Ingebritsen et al., 2006, pp. 77–79).

Bilateral and multilateral diplomacy have their characteristics for small states. The goals of small states are different from the diplomacy of large states. If the foreign policy of large states is often associated with strengthening their own international influence, persuasion, coercion, and, finally, the establishment of power over other states, then the diplomacy of small states is mainly focused on solving more specific problems – on specific issues related to security, politics, and economics. In this regard, bilateral and multilateral diplomacy is important not only for solving the above problems, but also for the survival of a small state.

Multilateral diplomacy of small states implies participation in international and regional organisations, forums or summits, where they can express their interests, cooperate with other countries, and raise their agenda on international platforms. Small states should determine their foreign policy priorities and develop relations only with those countries that are most important to them. For example, training qualified diplomats, opening diplomatic missions, and maintaining their activities can be quite a challenge due to limited personnel and material resources.

Bilateral diplomacy is considered more effective and flexible. Meanwhile, multilateral diplomacy and international organisations can serve both as a guarantee of security for small states and as a way to ignore the position of small states against the backdrop of influential large states.

Membership in international organisations is fundamentally important for them. This is because members of international organisations have equal power when voting on the principle of “one state, one vote” (Cooper & Shaw, 2022, p. 44). For example, within the framework of the UN General Assembly, all UN member states have the right to vote and participate in global governance, discussing international issues in accordance with the principle of equality of state sovereignty. Thus, officially, Kiribati has the same weight as Russia, China, India, or the United States (Henrikson, 2023, pp. 29–30). At the moment, at least 108 of the 193 UN member states are considered small states in terms of area, population, and GDP. The latter do not have separate global strategic

importance, but officially, they own more than half of the votes represented in the UN. Therefore, given the fact that global rules and norms are created by large states, small states usually follow the already established order.

The existing capabilities and accompanying limitations of diplomacy can potentially be used to counterbalance great powers (Krasnyak and Shaternikov, 2023, p. 145). For example, when the United Nations (UN) was founded in 1945, Luxembourg was the only small member state, and in 1960, the UN had only two small states, Luxembourg and Iceland. The involvement of these small states was criticised globally as irresponsible interference, which was almost considered unacceptable. At one point, the UN even presented a report by a “Committee of Experts” that recommended associate membership for small states without voting rights. There were views that small states lacked “the competence, experience and sufficiently established mechanisms to conduct an effective dialogue with other states” (Cooper and Shaw, 2019, pp. 52–54). However, the world is full of states that, despite their size, exist under the same rules, participate in international processes, and try to find their place in the complex web of global relations.

Small states often use international organisations and alliances for their niche diplomacy. By developing niche diplomacy, small states can provide each other with valuable information, including on the processes taking place in the UN Security Council. Ambassadors from many small states note: “When a small state is elected to the Security Council, it helps other small states to be informed about current developments.” Small states can successfully use “niche diplomacy” by focusing on specific areas where they have experience and capabilities (Ó Súilleabháin, 2014, p. 37). For example, Switzerland has been an active player in the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity, proposing new ideas, leading negotiations, and preventing deadlocks, which ultimately contributed to the successful adoption of the protocol (Schulz et al., 2017, p. 478).

The use of niche diplomacy can also be useful in the UN Security Council. Thus, Estonia was elected to the Security Council in 2020 as a recognized expert in the field of cybersecurity (Haugevik et al., 2021, pp. 56–57). This allowed Estonia to push the topic further than expected. In 2021, during the Estonian presidency, the first official Security Council meeting dedicated to cybersecurity issues was held. In the Security Council, small states often play a bridging role between large actors, contributing to the resolution of disagreements and the formation of a unified position on international security and peace issues within the Council.

In general, in international relations, several sources of power are distinguished: military, economic, technological, and diplomatic, but it is a fact that the important basis of international relations is power itself. Recent

developments in world politics have led to a change in the balance between soft and hard power. Those entities that do not have sufficient resources to use hard power must now, more than ever, rely on soft power to remain competitive and develop. Soft power is a product of development. It is the ability to make others think what you want, through cooperation or involvement, rather than through the use of force or violence. Soft power is a logical means of overcoming vulnerability. A small state, due to its limited resources, has an unequal position in the international arena in this case as well (Timilsana, 2024, pp. 147–148).

Methodology and Methods

A small state is often forced not to adopt an active policy, but to adapt to the results of external changes or seek external assistance to overcome them in order to ensure its national interests. Another option for addressing vulnerability is the new theory proposed by Baldur Thorhallsson in his book “Small States and Shelter Theory”, the Shelter theory.

The methodological basis for the study of small states was scientific methods of comparison, analysis, and generalisation. The results of the theoretical study are presented from the standpoint of shelter theory and a systems approach to studying small states in the context of multilateral international relations.

Results

To mitigate their vulnerabilities and meet their needs, small states seek what is also called “refuge,” which is provided by larger states and international organisations. The chances of small states surviving and thriving depend crucially on the nature of the refuge they receive. Thus, the theory of refuge addresses three interrelated issues of common interest to small states: first, risk reduction before a potential crisis occurs, second, assistance in overcoming the shock when the risk becomes a real threat, and third, support during the recovery phase. Today, in the era of hybrid warfare, this gap is even more apparent. How can Finland, for example, actually defend itself and rely on NATO when the threats are not only military, but also informational, diplomatic, cyber, and even cultural? Being an ally is no longer just about sending soldiers or signing a treaty. Today, the alliance must also be able to defend in the information arena.

Small states are facing a new reality where traditional approaches are no longer sufficient. They need flexible diplomacy to survive and thrive in this changing world (Thorhallsson, 2019, pp. 189–190). States seek refuge to counter all kinds of vulnerabilities. According to the theory of refuge, these vulnerabilities can be classified into three main areas: political, economic, and social vulnerability.

- Political refuge refers to the support that a state receives from other states or regional/international organisations when it needs to provide support from a political or military perspective. This can involve direct diplomatic support or even military protection provided by a partner state or international institutions, to reduce threats to the political autonomy of a small state. This support also includes the application of organisational rules and norms aimed at the protection and stability of a small state.

- Economic refuge includes the mechanisms of economic support that larger and stronger states or international organisations provide to small states in times of crisis. This support can take various forms, including direct economic assistance, monetary union, credit support, and participation in a common market. These measures help small states manage their economic situation, ensure stability, and reduce the risks arising from crises.

- Social shelter refers to the support provided in the social and public spheres, within the framework of the protection of human rights, the provision of social welfare, and general social stability. Shelter in this area can include assistance provided by international organisations, social programs, or reforms carried out within a small state, related to sustainable development, education or health. In this way, social shelter helps small states to face their external and internal challenges while maintaining social solidarity and stability. The security of small states begins at home. Social cohesion is an important resource in many small states, which increases stability and reduces the negative consequences of internal security. Small states are distinguished by enviable indicators of political stability.

Discussion

Shelter theory is not limited to independent states, but also considers other smaller political entities. Such entities, whether they are components of federations or united states, can also apply the logic of shelter theory: that is, their decision to leave or stay within a given state will depend on whether they receive sufficient shelter. For example, the majority of the population of Scotland decided that they would have better political, economic, and social shelter as part of the United Kingdom than if they became an independent state. If Scotland were to gain independence, it would still seek shelter from the UK, the European Union, NATO, and the United States. However, the smaller the state is in terms of its economy, territory, population, and military capabilities, the more effective the shelter theory is.

These estimates indicate that small states cannot rely entirely on their own capabilities. External support not only protects small states internationally but also helps them overcome internal constraints, such as a lack of local knowledge, underdeveloped infrastructure, and limited state-building

capabilities. Finally, a small state must find an international actor willing to provide it with sanctuary. This often comes at a cost and can involve deep penetration of the small state by a larger state or regional/international organisation, often with transformative effects on the small state and its society. The relationship of a sanctuary can have significant internal consequences for political, economic, and social developments in a small state. If the quest for protection and security is successful, it often comes at the cost of sacrificing autonomy in both domestic and foreign affairs (Ingebritsen et al., 2006, pp. 28–29). As Nicola Contessi notes, great powers are both an opportunity and a threat for small states. They are an opportunity because close cooperation with them can be a source of aid, patronage, prestige, and other advantages. However, they are also a threat, as obvious power imbalances make small states highly vulnerable to dependence, even dominance, in certain areas or overall by larger ones (Galstyan, 2021).

Conclusion

Thus, in the current multipolar world order, international organisations play a key role in cooperation between states, conflict prevention, and global governance. For small states, international organisations are not only a platform for advancing their interests but also a means of ensuring security, economic development, and political stability. However, while some mechanisms in international organisations ensure the participation of small states, they still face inequality of political influence, lack of resources, and the dominance of large powers. To overcome these challenges, small states must enhance their diplomatic capabilities, become more actively engaged in multilateral processes, and deepen cooperation with like-minded and security-oriented countries. Despite their real vulnerability, small states can create innovative strategies to confront external and internal challenges. They have turned limited resources into an advantage. The development of economic flexibility, specialisation in the service sector, as well as the effective use of new technologies and allied defence relations, allows small states not only to survive but also to play an active role in the international system. Therefore, the question is no longer whether small states can survive, but how they can redefine their place and role in the global system in a new way.

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