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Does size matter? To what extent do small states need to think and act differently in the ways that they approach the challenges of defence policy?

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In addressing the questions posed, this paper begins by noting inconsistencies in how small states are defined, both across various academic disciplines and by multilateral institutions. In order to retain focus on the core questions, the generally accepted parameters of the term "small state" in the defence policy literature is then adopted as the basis of further analysis.

Once definitional parameters are in place, a lack of homogeneity across so-called "small states" is quickly evident. This reality then necessitates an examination of a variety of small states, including those that cannot be labelled "western". To ensure that policies, actions and challenges are not only discussed through a limited, European, lens the paper examines small states in the Middle East and Asia. Given that the word "policies" is not used in the questions posed, it should also be noted that the paper equates the concept of what "small states need to think" with the defence and security policies (stated or implied) of those states.

Taking account of the variety across the small state sample, consideration is given to the shared features of how this cohort approaches defence challenges. A focus on these shared challenges provides a necessary comparative basis to examine small states relative to their larger peers. Certain challenges are common to all states. For this reason, this paper focuses on the extent or degree of difference in both the challenges faced and the means in which they are approached. The identification of commonalities for small states neither negates this reality nor implies that, by virtue of its "larger" classification another state may not, for a range of reasons and in particular circumstances, benefit from the selection of defence policies and actions more commonly associated with small states.

Beyond considering the core features of defence policy for small states, this paper seeks to situate that analysis within the current global defence context. Current insecurity and heightened debate on defence matters, particularly within the European Union (EU), may necessitate changes to historically successful policies and actions for small states. Ireland, as a small EU member state, is illustrative in this regard.

In order for this paper to be meaningful, it is important to reflect on what is meant by small states in the defence policy context. In her 2018 literature review, Jelena Radoman provides a helpful condensation of the evolution of academic definition associated with the concept of the small state. In so doing, she cites a range of influential authors writing as early as the 1960s, including Vital, Rothstein and Keohane. Early in her review, the

subjectivity and, ultimately pragmatism at the heart of all small state analysis emerges. Any attempt at simple definition based on geographical size, population etc. inevitably misses much of the richness to be gained from the comparative analysis of those states. For example, Radoman notes that Keohane and others focus on impact rather than size. This is not an objective assessment of the impact a state can make internationally but on whether its leaders perceive it as incapable of making such an impact (Radoman, 2018). What Radoman, and others such as Anders Wivel (2023), provide is a conceptualisation of the small state as materially limited but capable of mitigating its limitations.

Commentators such as Tom Long (2017), focus more on relational factors and the associated power dynamics, albeit still with a view to mitigating limitations. Long specifically considers power through the lenses of base, scope and means and, in this way, examines small states within the broader academic thought surrounding power. In this context, Long quotes Rostoks (2010) that from "the viewpoint of small states, exercise of power is more complicated than the mere ability of the strong to get what they want". Radoman (2017) refers to Laurent Goetschel's work and emphasises that states' self-perceptions and the policies which flow them draw not only from material reality but also the historical experiences of those states, both factual and believed, which in turn shape the perceptions of those states' leaders. Of course, as Goetschel (see Radoman, 2017) also points out, perceptions are, of their nature changeable and subject to alteration based on international developments and the consequent changes to the experience of the state concerned.

It is clear that a nuanced consideration of power and the diplomatic strategies deployed to survive and thrive in the shifting international power balance is necessary in this paper. However, notwithstanding the need to have due regard to the sheer variety of small states in existence today, it remains possible to identify some patterns from the available literature as to how small states think and behave in meeting modern defence challenges.

Despite the sophistication of available commentary, the obvious starting point of relative weakness remains important for small state comparison. As Kristjánsson (2022) notes, in reality, small states are generally not as influential internationally.

Modern commentators remain clear that, however one seeks to define the concept of "small", there are vulnerabilities shared by the world's less powerful states (Steinsson and Thorhallsson, 2017). As a matter of fact, small states do have access to less direct resources and capabilities than larger states. Even when defence policy and investment is strongly supported by governments and the public, smaller economies necessarily drive less spending. The associated military weakness creates an exposure to threats, both kinetic and otherwise which in turn, given the relative size of the associated economies, are likely to disproportionately impact the smaller state and its economy. Small states generally focus, not on material power, but rather on the actual power they do have at a point in history, more commonly termed influence. Small states often opt for a lighter security focus because of their resource limitations, shifting focus towards soft power goals (Adamides & Petrikkos, 2023).

Later writers have in mind more than defending against the traditional military threats foreseen by earlier commentators. However, the general point still holds, that is, that small states, given their inherent defence challenges as less powerful global actors, can be said to depend more on functioning international institutions and norms than their larger international counterparts. As Steinsson and Thorallsson note (2017), this fits with broader research findings that smaller states depend on economic openness and benefit disproportionately from globalisation.

The literature consistently points to the twin drivers of limited resources and a greater dependence on the rules based order for the international policies of small states. The bureaucratic and research machinery of international institutions is markedly more helpful to small states who lack an equivalent domestic capacity. They also, arguably reduce the diplomacy overhead by creating additional opportunities for multilateral engagement where previously bilateral interaction would have been required (Steinsson and Thorallsson, p.13 quoting Karns & Mingst, 2004). The remainder of this paper assumes limited resources and international institution dependency to be the differentiating features of defence thinking and measures for small states versus their larger counterparts.

All states, irrespective of their power and size, face similar defence challenges, albeit to different extents and for different reasons. It is evident, however, that diplomacy plays a necessarily larger role in relation to defence in smaller states. Furthermore, and again reflecting resource limitations, prioritisation is the central marker of successful diplomacy by this cohort (Steinsson and Thorallsson 2017). The argument presented by commentators such as Tallberg (2008) is that, through prioritisation, small states can exert an amount of influence on particular issues that, at first glance, seems improbable. The centrality of Luxembourg to EU level discussions of financial services matters is a good example of this as is the high profile of the Nordic states on humanitarian issues (Steinsson and Thorallsson 2017).

To compensate for their small administrative and analytical capacities and capabilities, small states sometimes rely on the expertise of larger states on matters on which they share preferences, build coalitions with other small states, or develop close ties with the technocratic wings of international bodies such as EU Commission. Pragmatism is vital for the successful small state and must often make way for sovereign idealism. As Brands & William Inboden state, “if good statecraft demands a feel for the relationship between structure and contingency, it equally requires a constant awareness of both limits and possibilities” (2018).

In the EU, Luxembourg has been known to let Belgium represent it in EU meetings and historically worked closely with the Netherlands rotating presidency on the European Council (Steinsson and Thorallsson, 2017). It has also been noted that small states, through the informality of their officials and processes are attractive partners for Commission teams seeking to advance policies, just as the analytical capacity of the Commission benefits smaller states. Of course, it should be acknowledged that it is much easier for the Commission to satisfy small states and obtain their support for policy proposals than it is to persuade a big state. For instance, it is much cheaper for the Commission to increase milk quotas in Ireland compared with Italy. (Steinsson and Thorallsson, 2017). However, it is argued that this reality

does not negate the former relational point entirely and more recent commentary (Economist, 2023) questions whether such favourable conditions for smaller states within the EU are sustainable. Beyond Europe, Corbett and Connell (2015) recount the challenges that small Pacific states face in maintaining international influence and a consequent reliance of "expatriate expertise". To maintain permanent missions in New York, several of these small island states share offices with Australia.

Small states can take advantage of their flexible, autonomous, and informal diplomatic forces. Unlike their larger counterparts, their bureaucracies can make decisions rapidly. Decision-making often occurs informally, as officials tend to know each other (even the lowest-ranking and highest-ranking officials) and make joint decisions through informal meetings. Commentators include the responsiveness of the Finnish security community and the Maltese public health adaptability in the face of COVID as illustrative here. International publications also point to this as a strength of Irish public servants (see Economist, 2020 and Dinan,2023). Importantly though, commentators do note the increased risk of cronyism and consequent "group think" type ineffectiveness in informal environments and the importance of informality and flexibility being supported by appropriate governance to avoid corruption (Briffa, 2022).

Formal alliances, including military ones, play a key role in shaping the defence policies of small states and remain critical to their survival. Alliances offer protection or "shelter" to small states, whether it is by way of aligning with stronger partners (sometimes referred to as bandwagoning) or through the less-common "balancing" style alliance which involves partnering with other weaker actors against more powerful or malignant ones. Steinsson and Thorallson (2017) offer a detailed consideration of how alliances are utilised by small states. However, in modern times, alliance is generally seen through membership of, and partnership with multilateral institutions such as NATO and the UN or regional equivalents like the EU. In considering the options facing small Eastern Balkan states in light of the prevailing geopolitics, Gashi (2016) suggests the only feasible strategic option is alliance with NATO. Interestingly, he links this assertion with the imperative of building a professional military capability in small states.

Beyond defensive readiness, analysts have revealed a number of ways in which diplomatically effective small states make use of their alliances. For example, the oil exporting middle eastern states and Norway have made extensive efforts to influence American foreign policy domestically through US based think tanks (New York Times, 2014). Of course, happy accidents of geography and circumstances can and do sometimes play a role. Small states that also happen to be strategically important can wield disproportionate power. For example, when Iceland, which had openly expressed its ambivalence about continuing partnership with NATO, used its strategic importance to NATO during the Cold War to successfully extend its fishery limits in the "so called" Cod Wars against Britain, West Germany, and Belgium.

Neutrality is most commonly pursued by small states to minimise threats by branding themselves as neutral, peace-promoting and "honest brokers". This role for small states is nothing new. Switzerland and the Nordics are invariably cited as the classic example. Neutral positioning allows states to take on fact-finding and mediating roles that other states could normally only entrust to neutral actors. The complexity of the Irish debate around neutrality

is indicative of the fact that the term "neutrality" can mean different things to different people at different times. Some observers fail to note that Swiss neutrality, for example, was supported by a defence budget in 2023 worth 3.9% of their gross domestic product. A similar reality exists in Singapore (Hashim, 2020) and neutrality and increased defence spending are not mutually exclusive concepts. In fact, the historic experiences of neutral states often create a high level of commitment to military matters with Finland providing a useful example.

The role of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in regional affairs in the middle east offers useful insight into the functions of a small state attempting to maintain its relative neutrality, if only for reasons of strategic hedging, and the tensions which arise for those state as security situations shift. When the UAE announced a normalisation of relations with Israel in 2020, the pragmatism underpinning the move was evident. Irrespective of negative intellectual criticism domestically and some minor push back from other Arab states, the UAE government surmised that this was worth taking to advance relations with the United States (Hashim, 2020). How long the UAE position can be sustained is questionable in light of the ongoing war in Gaza (Reuters, 8 May 2024). Similarly, the shifting security situation globally has raised questions in recent years about the viability of maintaining a policy of neutrality elsewhere.

Sweden and Finland have after many years of neutrality both recently joined NATO prompted by the Russian offensive against Ukraine. While ostensibly both have reached similar policy decisions in similar timeframes, Michalski et al (2024) provide a useful analysis which demonstrates that while small states share many features, individual history and domestic situations necessitate that defence decisions are made on a case by case basis. Small state theory only offering the basic principles and precedents. Public and political consensus were key to expediting the NATO alliance in Finland (Michalski et al 2024) and much more difficult to navigate in Sweden. The Swedish public, arguably in common with the Irish, were more vocally and philosophically attached to the concept of state neutrality than the Finnish population and in the years preceding the invasion of Ukraine had largely shown disinterest in the informal military co-operation pursued by its government. This has resulted in some ambivalence towards NATO membership in the population, even in the face of current regional instability and the absence of any other option. The diplomatic and domestic implications of this lack of state cohesion remain to be seen.

A detailed analysis of the parameters and rationale underpinning Irish military neutrality is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth reflecting on the growing commentary, internationally and domestically, on the sustainability of Ireland's position, as it seeks to maintain goodwill with key strategic partners against the backdrop of a volatile global and European security context. This sustainability must be assessed in light of the open nature of Ireland's economy, the rise of asymmetric threats and the continuing lack of domestic political appetite beyond the security community for a change to the status quo of low defence investment and development. As Michalski, et al (2024) note through the Swedish example in particular, we are in a time of rapid change in traditional foreign policy roles for small states. It is incumbent on governments to try to regain control over the situation by finding consistency in new or adjusted roles of which recent "triple-lock" discussions could be said to be reflective. However, the authors also note that such developments may generate significant internal political tension. (2024).

Writing for the UK based Royal United Services Institute, Eoin Michael McNamara (2023) highlights the 2022 Nord Stream as illustrative of the risk associated with Ireland's lack of defence focus, noting calls from senior EU Commission figures at the time for Ireland not to be "a weak link". McNamara's call for increased investment is further supported by the broader small states literature which is clear that small states share a pronounced vulnerability to unconventional threats (Treverton et al, 2018). By reason of geography and its open economy, Ireland appears to be especially vulnerable. Arguably, the absence of a formal Irish National Security Statement and enhanced intelligence capacity (Mulqueen, 2009) increases this vulnerability further as does an apparent societal refusal to countenance a meaningful increase in defence focus and spending, notwithstanding the recommendations of the Commission on the Defence Forces. This vulnerability has also been recently similarly highlighted by other UK authors through the lens of the risks created to the United Kingdom through current security arrangements in Northern Ireland. While the British interest focus of these publications needs to be acknowledged it is fair to suggest that they reflect the exposure created by current Irish defence arrangements. There is also no evidence to suggest that this British analysis is inconsistent with that of our European partners.

A general emphasis on small states may also develop soft power through culture, values, and societal measures. The centrality of this approach to Irish diplomacy has been well articulated elsewhere (Economist, 2020 and Gibney, 2020) and this paper will not attempt to add any value in this regard. This approach has also been pursued by Qatar and Singapore but it is becoming increasingly clear that soft power on its own is insufficient in turbulent times. Bonus (September 2022) sets out the contemporary need to achieve a balance between hard and soft power and acknowledge the vulnerability which an over-emphasis on soft power can bring. Hard power has its place in maintaining the respectful ecological balance which allows trust to grow between states of all sizes. The best approach is a matter for each state to determine itself having regard to its unique history and current situational factors. Regional developments in recent years, and the associated threats from other Arab states, have shifted the Qatari government focus once best characterised as soft power dominant to a situation where arms acquisition and concerted lobbying of western military powers have become the focus (Hashim, 2020). Singapore was forced to learn to balance hard and soft power early in its statehood after the failure of the exiting British colonial power to support transitionary defence as originally committed. While US actors have begun to raise questions over the extent of the state's ties to China (see Guardian 1 Feb 2024), the state has earned a strong reputation for its neutral diplomatic ability backed by military force, earning it considerable respect in both economic and defence circles internationally and the associated security benefits.

This paper has focused largely on the concept of external threats to small states. However, even this brief analysis would be lacking if it did not acknowledge the disproportionate vulnerability of small states to asymmetric threats and hybrid warfare. With the growth of Russian aggression, small states are particularly exposed to threats such as misinformation. Tynan (2023) has also written about the need for a whole of Government approach to addressing the risk to social cohesion from the far right, particularly through the internet. Equally, Qatar and the UAE can be seen to have suffered from the erosion of social cohesion (Hashim, 2020) with attendant security destabilisation.

There is sizeable evidence to support a conclusion that size does indeed matter in relation to the development and execution of defence policy. Size, as understood with reference to the understanding of the concept of power set out in the small states literature, necessarily limits the range of options available to a given state at any point in time. Policy choices and actions are quickly impacted by security developments internationally, given the common inability of smaller states to defend themselves without external support and the higher level of vulnerability they face. Focused diplomatic relations and effective defence are arguably co-dependent within the small state context. Neither element should be neglected on an assumption that a peaceful status quo can continue indefinitely.

The influence of domestic politics on defence decision making in small states warrants further analysis than this paper can offer. All states are different: historically; geographically; and economically. Only detailed analysis can reveal meaningful trends. Radoman (2017) highlights Jeanne Hey's view that domestic politics and the personalities of leaders only have a minor impact on the ultimate shape of decisions which will ultimately be determined by external circumstances. However, in cases such as Ireland, the reality and scale of the external risk often needs to be both understood and accepted more generally before the domestic political apparatus will respond as recommended by defence analysts.

Also worthy of further analysis is the challenge made by De Carvalho and Neumann (2015) to the traditional assumption that small states only pursue practical or material benefit. They cite Norway as precedent for the argument that small states do pursue ideational goals. If this assertion were to hold up to further scrutiny, it may be necessary to re-visit certain assumptions in the Irish policy community about the openness to any perceived change to Ireland's neutrality.

Finally, as articulated by Steinwitz (2010), we live in a rapidly changing world where it is dangerous to assume that current international norms and relationships can remain stable. They note Russian aggression but also the economic rise of China, Brazil and India as well as the pressures facing Africa. Importantly though they recall that times of challenge also invariably bring opportunity. Given the increase in global insecurity since Steinwitz set out his perspective in 2010, those small states with track records in neutral diplomacy and compromise, face a key time of challenge and opportunity. It remains to be seen to what extent such states, including Ireland, can now re-focus their defence and diplomatic efforts to effectively and sustainably contribute meaningfully to addressing complex challenges globally.

Please note that the views expressed above are those of the author alone and should not be taken to represent the views of the Department of Defence or of any other group or organisation.

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