A SMALL STATE'S SECURITY STRATEGY IN A CHANGING WORLD – REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA CASE STUDY

Marina STĂNESCU
stanescu.marina.simona@gmail.com
"CAROL I" NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY, BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

ABSTRACT

The theory of international relations has traditionally focused on the behavior and strategies of great powers, often marginalizing the unique challenges and opportunities faced by small states in the international system. This article explores the foreign policies of small states through the lens of key international relations theories. It argues that while small states are often seen as reactive or constrained by the dominance of larger powers, they can exercise significant agency through strategic alignment, multilateral engagement, and normative influence. By leveraging international institutions, economic diplomacy, and soft power, small states can enhance their security and achieve their foreign policy objectives despite their limited material resources. This article provides insights into the broader role of small states in the international system, using the Republic of Moldova as a case study to highlight how neutrality can be a proactive and effective foreign policy in a complex global environment. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how small states can play an active and influential role in international relations.

KEYWORDS:

Neutrality, small states, geopolitics, international relations theory, foreign policies

1. Introduction

In addressing the role of small states in international relations, it is essential to consider their unique vulnerabilities and the strategies they employ to navigate the global political landscape. Small states often face challenges in achieving favorable foreign policy outcomes due to power asymmetries with larger states (Steinsson & Thorhallsson, 2017).

Realism posits that the international system is anarchic, and states must prioritize survival and security. For small states, this often translates into cautious foreign policy strategies, including neutrality and alignment with larger powers. Realism also explains the vulnerability of small states to external threats and their reliance on international norms and alliances for protection (Simpson, 2018).

However, they can exert influence on world politics by adopting appropriate strategies, such as engaging in multilateral organizations, which help to reduce power disparities and transaction costs of diplomacy (Steinsson & Thorhallsson, 2017). Despite their constraints, small states have effectively managed to sustain both bilateral and multilateral relationships while playing an active role in international organizations. They utilize various diplomatic strategies, including public diplomacy to build cooperative ties with larger nations and to highlight their concerns and priorities on the global stage. This demonstrates the potential for small states to contribute to regional security and global peace through noninstitutionalized security alliances.

Small states have often been overlooked in international relations in

favor of more powerful actors. However, these states play a crucial role by utilizing unique strategies to navigate the complexities of global politics.

This article explores the characteristics, strategic behaviors, and theoretical frameworks surrounding small states in international relations, drawing on international academic views to provide a general image of their security needs and employed means to achieve them.

Small states often face unique challenges in securing their security due to limited resources and strategic vulnerabilities. The security of small states is a multifaceted issue, often influenced by their limited capabilities and the need to navigate complex geopolitical landscapes.

The Republic of Moldova serves as a compelling case study that illustrates the unique challenges and strategies employed by small states to safeguard their sovereignty and national interests. Moldova's security landscape is heavily influenced by its Soviet past and ongoing territorial disputes, particularly the Transnistrian conflict. The nation's commitment to neutrality, coupled with its aspirations for European integration, underscores its efforts to balance relationships with larger powers while seeking international support.

Moldova actively participates in various global organizations, including the UN, OSCE, EU, and NATO, reflecting its diplomatic strategies aimed at fostering cooperation and cultivating a positive international image. Engaging in UN peacekeeping missions not only allows Moldova to contribute to global security initiatives but also enhances its own defense capabilities. Small states often leverage their non-threatening status to gain influence through coalition-building and consensus-driven approaches within institutional settings, thereby protecting themselves from the aggressive actions of larger nations.

Furthermore, historical and cultural connections with neighboring countries, such as Ukraine, are integral to Moldova's security and foreign policy strategies. However, contradictions persist in Moldova's complicated relationship with Russia, characterized by Russia's reluctance to fully recognize Moldova's sovereignty and its attempts to shape the country's foreign policy direction.

2. Defining small states

In general lines, small states are generally defined by their limited geographical size, population, economic resources, and military capabilities. While there's no single agreed-upon definition, there's broad consensus in the literature that small states are characterized by their relative lack of power, their limited ability to influence global or regional affairs, and their particular vulnerabilities in the international system. Scholars tend to agree on these general characteristics, even if they differ on specific criteria or thresholds (Keohane, 1969).

The concept of "smallness" is relative and context-dependent. In international relations, small states are more vulnerable to external pressures and crises, which necessitates a distinct approach to foreign policy and international engagement. The lack of a consensus definition for small states stems from the fact that they have been conceptualized in various ways. Different studies have characterized what constitutes a "small state" quite differently. There's significant debate over whether quantifiable or qualitative criteria are more appropriate for defining small states. However, this fundamental disagreement has been advantageous for the field of small-state studies. It has provided conceptual flexibility, allowing the definition to adapt to different research designs and the considerable diversity among small states worldwide. In essence, both in international relations theory and in practice, multiple definitions of small states exist and should continue to do so (Maass, 2009).

In other disciplines, a "small" or "smaller" state may denote a state with

limited government involvement in societal or economic affairs (Fukuyama, 2004, p. 22). Similarly, a "weak state" could indicate weak governmental control or a lack of influence in international relations (Handel, 1981). Thus, state power can be seen as having both an internal dimension and an external dimension (Olafsson, 1998, p. 3).

This article assumes the term "small state" generally refers to the relative size of a state within the international system.

In light of all of the aforementioned characteristics, one could easily conclude that the Republic of Moldova is indeed a small country, not only based on its relatively small dimension – approximately 33,846 square kilometers, and a population of around 2.5 million people (as of 2023 estimates) (UN, 2023) and a GDP (nominal) of approximately $15.3 billion (2022) (World Bank Group, 2023), but especially due to its limited foreign policy level of ambition and defence capacity (GFP, 2024).

Moldova also officially maintains neutrality, which can be seen as a strategic approach to avoid entanglement in great power conflicts, especially between NATO and Russia. However, this neutrality is constrained by its geopolitical vulnerabilities, making Moldova reliant on international organizations for security assurances.

In sum, Moldova exemplifies the characteristics of both a small and weak state, with limited governmental control internally and limited influence externally, and navigates its security by leveraging external partnerships and alliances.

3. Small state security strategies

Research on defensive alliances indicates that they are especially beneficial for small states. Notably, allies typically honor their commitments, providing defense support when one is attacked (Leeds, 2003; Johnson & Leeds, 2011). Besides deterring potential threats, alliances allow partners to restrain each other's actions (Fang, Johnson & Leeds, 2014). They also alleviate defense costs by sharing resources, granting small states access to technology, intelligence, and resources they couldn't develop independently. Moreover, alliances often foster economic cooperation, which can increase trade between allied nations and reduce the likelihood of being targeted by adversaries.

To counteract their inherent limitations and significantly impact global affairs, smaller nations have employed various tactics. These approaches include utilizing international organizations, conducting public diplomacy efforts, collaborating with non-governmental organizations, and establishing informal alliances. Scholarly research indicates that although smaller countries face challenges due to their size, they are not without influence and can be impactful participants in the international arena.

Small states have different approaches even within international organizations. Researchers have examined whether the unique characteristics of smaller states – such as strong corporatism and concentrated economic interests – affect their approach to decision-making even those within the EU (Minculete, 2014). The empirical evidence gathered by Thorhallsson supports the idea that the behavior of smaller states is distinct from that of larger states. Smaller states tend to interact differently with the Commission and employ different negotiation strategies compared to larger states within the Council of Ministers, the European Council, and in bilateral negotiations with the Commission. This difference in behavior can be attributed to the limited capacity and distinctive features of small state administrations, as well as their narrower range of interests. Due to their small administrations, these states are often compelled to prioritize specific sectors within these policy areas, as they lack the personnel, expertise, and resources to actively participate in all negotiations. Consequently, they tend to be reactive in many sectors but take a proactive stance in their most critical areas. Their unique administrative characteristics – such as informality, flexible decision-making, broader discretion for officials, guidelines

rather than rigid instructions for negotiators, and the significant role of Permanent Representatives in domestic policymaking – help them manage their workload and effectively navigate the decision-making processes (Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006).

The Republic of Moldova, as a small state, has employed a range of strategies to navigate its geopolitical challenges and enhance its role in international relations. Moldova actively participates in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe. Through these platforms, Moldova has been able to voice its concerns, particularly concerning security issues, such as the unresolved Transnistria conflict and regional stability. The organization is committed to continuing to pursue a peaceful, comprehensive, and lasting resolution that respects the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized borders, while providing a special status for Transnistria within Moldova (OSCE, 2024).

Moldova has increasingly used public diplomacy to strengthen ties with larger powers and international organizations. For instance, Moldova's European Union integration efforts have been marked by diplomatic outreach and public diplomacy campaigns. The country signed a Security and Defence Partnership with the EU in 2024 (EEAS, 2024), Public diplomacy is used to engage the Moldovan diaspora and EU countries, projecting an image of commitment to European values and reforms. In 2023, the Republic of Moldova hosted the European Political Community Summit, an event that brought together 47 heads of State and Government, as well as the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the President of the European Parliament (EPC, 2023).

In addition, Moldova has sought to improve its international image by promoting itself as a neutral country in regional conflicts, while also emphasizing its commitment to human rights and democratic governance. Furthermore, the country is actively participating in peacekeeping missions in parts of the globe being under UN, EU or NATO (Ministry of Defense, 2024). These efforts help attract foreign aid and investment and reinforce Moldova's role as a security provider.

Moldova has developed strong partnerships with international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to address both domestic and international issues. These NGOs often help small states like Moldova amplify their voice on the international stage by advocating for human rights, good governance, and democratic reforms. Moldova has worked closely with NGOs like Transparency International and Freedom House (Cenusa, 2023), benefiting from their support to combat corruption, strengthen civil society, and improve governance – issues that are central to its foreign policy and European integration. These partnerships also contribute to capacity-building in Moldova, especially in the areas of judicial reform, anti-corruption measures, and human rights protection, which align with international norms and attract greater international recognition and support.

Moldova, given its geopolitical situation between the EU and Russia, has sought to balance its foreign policy through pragmatic, noninstitutionalized alliances. While not a member of any major security alliance like NATO, Moldova cooperates closely with NATO through the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. This allows Moldova to enhance its military and security capabilities without formally joining the alliance, which would be a sensitive issue given its constitutional neutrality (NATO, 2023).

In addition, Moldova has been strengthening its bilateral relations with Romania, a key ally in the EU. Romania has been one of Moldova's strongest advocates in Brussels, supporting its aspirations for deeper integration into the

European community and providing economic and energy assistance. The close relationship with Romania also provides a layer of security and economic support, as Romania serves as Moldova's gateway to the EU.

The Republic of Moldova, like many small states, has adopted a variety of strategies to overcome its inherent geopolitical disadvantages. In addition to all other strategies, the Republic of Moldova maintains its Constitutional neutrality.

Neutrality and Non-Alignment represent one common strategy for small states as seen in countries like Austria, Malta, Switzerland, and the Republic of Moldova. Many small states opt for neutrality. Beyond the pressures of the international system and the changing ambitions of powerful leaders, a neutral state's survival hinges on proving that it poses no threat and is genuinely neutral. By offering diplomatic and humanitarian services, it becomes more valuable to larger powers than if it were aligned or conquered (Karsh, 1988).

According to the OSCE Code of Conduct on politico-military aspects of security, each participating State has the sovereign right to join or refrain from joining international organizations, as well as to participate or not participate in bilateral or multilateral treaties, including alliances. They also have the right to remain neutral. States may change their status in these matters, in accordance with relevant agreements and procedures, and will respect the same rights of all other States (OSCE, 1994). Neutrality allows these states to avoid entanglement in conflicts and maintain sovereignty and stability.

In general lines, small states form alliances with other states or groups of states to counterbalance a dominant or threatening power. Some small states choose neutrality to avoid entanglement in conflicts between larger powers, maintaining their sovereignty by not siding with any major alliances. Small states may also engage in bandwagoning, aligning with larger powers for protection and economic benefits, or balancing, and joining alliances to counteract a dominant power. For instance, many small states in Eastern Europe have sought NATO and EU membership as a means of balancing against Russian influence. These strategies highlight the small states' need to navigate a challenging geopolitical landscape by leveraging alliances and international institutions (Steinsson & Thorhallsson, 2017).

Small states often champion multilateralism and international law, advocating for a rules-based international order that protects their interests.

However, neutrality is not a firm guarantee of obtaining security as shown in *The Melian Dialogue.* The situation depicted in this work takes place during the Peloponnesian War, where the Athenians, a powerful empire, demanded that the neutral island of Melos submit to their rule or face destruction. The Melians, refusing to submit, maintain hope that moral rights will protect them. Unfortunately, their defiance leads to the siege and eventual destruction of Melos (Juchler, 2018).

The dialogue portrays the imbalance of power between large and small states. Melos, a small and militarily weak state, is vulnerable to the demands and threats of a much stronger Athenian empire. This power asymmetry leaves small states with limited options: submit to the will of the stronger power or face potentially catastrophic consequences. Just like Melos, the Republic of Moldova is a small country situated between larger and more powerful neighbors. Moldova's geographic position and weak military and economic capacity (COFACE, 2024) make it vulnerable to external pressure and influence, similar to how Melos was vulnerable to Athens' demands.

As the Melians did, the Republic of Moldova relies heavily on external assistance. The Melians were counting on the potential intervention of Sparta, their ally. However, this reliance proves futile, as

Sparta does not come to their aid. Small states often depend on alliances with more powerful states for their security, but these alliances can be unreliable, leaving them exposed if the promised support does not materialize.

Furthermore, the Melians face a brutal dilemma: resist and risk annihilation, or submit and lose their independence. This mirrors the broader security dilemma of small states, where efforts to resist larger powers can provoke aggression, yet submission can lead to a loss of sovereignty and autonomy.

The Melian Dialogue is a powerful illustration of the security challenges faced by small states. It shows how power imbalances, the limitations of moral arguments in the face of realpolitik, and the unreliability of alliances can create existential threats for small states. The dilemma of choosing between resistance and submission, and between sovereignty and survival, remains a pressing issue for small states in the international system today.

The Melian Dialogue remains relevant in today's discussions of neutrality for several reasons: it illustrates that neutrality is not a modern concept, having been acknowledged even in ancient times; it reveals the enduring nature of debates surrounding war and neutrality; and it underscores the fact that realists have historically been interested in the concept of neutrality (Simpson, 2018).

The ideological struggle between Soviet communism and Western liberal democracy led to a global balance of power that aligns well with a realist perspective of international politics. For realists, a balance of power is both a conscious and inevitable aspect of international relations, while for neo-realists, it is seen as a natural result of the international system (Sheehan, 2005, p. 19). Realists assert that power is a key determinant of international behavior, and that self-preservation is the primary duty of any state. Additionally, small states typically engage in balancing strategies to maintain the international status quo, as they are not positioned to pursue revisionist policies. These states face political constraints, including geographical factors, that limit their options. As a result, adopting neutrality to preserve their sovereignty by placating the Soviets was a logical and appropriate strategy. By choosing neutrality during the emergence of the Cold War balance of power in the 1950s, neutral nations helped maintain the status quo, serving as geopolitical buffers between East and West. Although the Soviets could have occupied Austria and Finland after World War II, as they did with countries like Poland, their neutrality appeased Soviet concerns. From the perspective of the U.S. and Western Europe, the neutral bloc acted as a buffer zone throughout the Cold War (Hakovirta, 1983, p. 570). Furthermore, the acceptance of neutral states by both superpowers demonstrated mutual restraint, contributing to the overall balance of power.

For realists, neutral states may have a marginal role in the balance of power, but the post-Cold War era has lacked such a balance. Morgenthau argues that "*the neutrality of the small European states is essentially a function of the balance of power*" (Morgenthau, 1939, p. 482). For small states, neutrality is driven by national security concerns, yet realists, especially neo-realists, view it as a consequence of the balance of power.

The period that followed the Cold War, was marked by U.S. hegemony (Layne, 1993), rendering neutrality less relevant. However, with the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, the tensions in the Middle East, and the growing economic power of countries like India and Brazil, a reshuffle of the multi-polar balance of power is currently taking shape. From a realist and neo-realist perspective, this shift could signal a return to traditional international politics and potentially determine some small states to abandon neutrality as seen in Finland and Sweeden case.

The Republic of Moldova employs various strategies to maintain its neutrality and protect its sovereignty, particularly in the face of Russia's hybrid warfare. Moldova's military operates on the principle of defensive sufficiency, focusing on safeguarding its independence and territorial integrity. This defensive approach aligns with international norms, allowing the Republic of Moldova to maintain a military for self-defense, according to the Constitution (Constituția Republicii Moldova, 2018).

Despite its neutral status, Moldova's security is also supported by building strong ties with countries like Romania, France, Germany, the UK, the USA, the EU, and NATO to counterbalance malign Russian interference.

Moreover, De Carvalho & Neumann (2015) challenge the view that small states are solely driven by material or practical goals like the survival (seen as maintenance of sovereignty) of the nation. Their research shows that small states, like larger ones, also pursue ideational objectives.

Moldova's neutrality is a response to its geopolitical position between the European Union and Russia. The country seeks to balance its foreign relations to maintain stability and avoid external conflicts. This case highlights the challenges and complexities faced by small states in volatile regions.

The European integration initiative is seen as a vital advancement that has established a security framework for small EU member states following the Cold War. Nevertheless, recent shifts have created challenges for their security identities and interests (Wivel, 2005). Membership in regional institutions, can serve as a strategic aim for small states, helping to address multiple security concerns while also influencing their strategic agendas and discourse (Bailes & Þórhallsson, 2012).

International institutions, such as the United Nations Security Council, play a crucial role in providing small states with platforms of influence and institutional shelter, enhancing their security within the international system (Reire, 2021). Additionally, some small states, like Switzerland, have adopted a self-reliant stance to counter security challenges with external assistance (Pulami, 2024). These states aim to contribute to international peace and security, showcasing how small states can play a role in promoting global stability (Malužinas, 2024). Furthermore, economic security is a vital component for small states, with the economic stability of small and medium-sized enterprises being interconnected with national security and economic power (Denysenko, 2023).

Contextually understanding national security is crucial for small states, as it influences their defense policies and strategic decisions (Johanson, 2022). The versatility of economic power is another essential factor for small states, as it affects their capacity to translate economic strength into strategic influence, ultimately impacting their security alignments (Ross, 2018). Studying the security challenges faced by small states reveals important strategies these countries implement to address their security issues (Sweeney & Derdzinski, 2010).

The concept of the *"smart state"* has been applied to small-state strategies within the European Union, highlighting the adaptive nature of small states in navigating complex security environments (Þórhallsson & Wivel, 2006). The security environment of small states requires careful consideration of various approaches, including neutrality, regional security organizations, and integration into Western security structures (Ušiak, 2018). Additionally, the external and internal security challenges faced by small, landlocked states underscore the importance of addressing diverse security threats (Bagale, 2023).

4. Conclusion

Small states play a unique and significant role in international relations, utilizing diverse strategies to navigate the

global landscape. Their actions are influenced by a range of factors, including geography, economic capacity, and international norms. By understanding the theoretical frameworks and strategic behaviors of small states, we gain insight into the broader dynamics of global politics and the importance of inclusivity in international governance.

Through active participation in multilateral organizations, effective use of public diplomacy, cooperation with NGOs, and forming pragmatic, noninstitutionalized alliances, Moldova has sought to carve out a meaningful role on the international stage. These strategies help Moldova secure its sovereignty, advance its European aspirations, and address pressing security concerns, including the unresolved Transnistria conflict.

In summary, the Republic of Moldova secures its security through a combination of neutrality, international cooperation, and the pursuit of European integration, while also facing challenges from unresolved conflicts and external pressures. Its strategies are indicative of the broader dynamics that small states encounter in international relations, as they strive to assert their sovereignty and protect their national interests amidst the influence of larger powers.

On the international stage, Moldova's position reflects the small state's lack of power in global affairs (Handel, 1981). It is heavily dependent on external actors, such as the European Union, NATO, and Russia, for security and economic stability. Moldova uses strategies like balancing and bandwagoning to navigate between Russia's influence and the Western alliance, reflecting its limited capacity to assert itself independently in international relations.

The case of Moldova serves as a testament to the resilience and strategic acumen of small states in safeguarding their security interests amidst complex geopolitical dynamics.

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