



SMALL COUNTRIES AND THEIR STRATEGIC MANEUVERING IN A MULTIPOLAR SYSTEM

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Abstract

Small countries play a special role in the modern international relations system, whose foreign policy is driven not only by their geographical location and resources, but also with the ability to maneuver. The multipolar world, where power is distributed between several global centers, creates both opportunities and challenges for small states. The Baltic States - Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia - are an interesting and typical example of how a small state can strengthen their place, ensure security, and protect political interests under the influence of global and regional forces.

This work aims to analyze the theoretical framework of the foreign policy of small states, discuss the specifics of the polar system, and demonstrate these processes on the strategic choice of the Baltic states. The work argues that the success of the Baltic states is largely conditioned by their ability to strategic maneuver between global forces, to use multilateral alliances (NATO, the EU), and at the same time maintain their national interests.

Under the polar system, the strategies of small states are based on balancing, co-operation and multilateralism. The Baltic example shows that integration into regional security mechanisms, enlargement of partners and the use of "soft power" is crucial for small states. Thus, small states are not just passive players, but also actively form an international order if they have the right strategic vision and flexible foreign policy.

Key words: Small countries, Multi-polar system, Baltic states, Regional security, Strategic maneuvering.

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Introduction

In the theory of international relations, small states are often seen as "auxiliary actors" whose function is to provide the balance of power between the great states. However, in the 21st century this perception changed significantly. Against the backdrop of complex challenges of globalization, regional integration and security, small states are increasingly showing their active role in the international arena. Their strategic choices and foreign policy maneuvers often have a crucial impact not only on regional but also on global processes.

The concept of a multi-polar system, which implies the existence of several law enforcement centers in the international system, is a new reality in 21st century politics. If after the end of the Cold War, the world was single-polar character (US hegemony), from the second decade of the 21st century, the signs of multipolar order clearly appear: US, China, EU, Russia and other regional forces are equally struggling for global influence. In this context, small states have to make difficult choices: which force to catch a close relationship, how to balance competitive forces, and how to ensure their own security.

The Baltic States - Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia - are an excellent example of small states. Historically, they constantly existed under the influence of great empires - Russia, Germany, and Sweden. In the 20th century, their independence was restricted several times: first by re-extracting freedom after the collapse of the Soviet occupation and then after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, the Baltic states are small states that successfully carry out strategic maneuverability in the multipolar system: they are members of the EU and NATO, actively fighting for their own security and at the same time using "soft power" (for example, promotion of democracy and human rights in the post-Soviet space).

The main research question of the work can be: How do small states maneuver in the multipolar system and what is the experience of the Baltic countries in this process?

The hypothesis is as follows: The strategic success of the Baltic states is largely driven by their ability to integrate into multilateral international organizations, create strong security networks, and use both military and economic and cultural tools to protect their interests.

Chapter I - Theoretical Determination of Small States

The study of the states is one of the most controversial issues in international relations. What are the criteria for a "small state"? Some authors believe that this is a category defined by the population and the territory, while others focus on military and economic opportunities.

Raymo Viroenen points out that small states are already characterized by "structural insecurity", forcing them to constantly seek guarantees for security.¹

There are several basic criteria:

1. Geographical and demographic scale - Small states usually have a small area and population.
2. Economic capabilities - They often have limited resources, but some of them (for example, Qatar) still have a significant effect on wealth.
3. Military Forces - Small states rarely own strong arms and mainly depend on alliances.
4. Attitudes on Great States - Small states are forced to make a strategic choice for external forces.

However, modern literature emphasizes that the definition of a "small state" should not be limited to quantitative criteria. Much more important is their strategic flexibility, ie how effectively they use them.

International system resources and institutions to pursue their own interests.

Foreign policy strategies of small states include:

Balancing - balancing the influence of great forces (for example, the Baltic States attempt to reduce Russia's influence).

Bandwagoning - direct binding to a stronger state.²

Neutrality - avoiding direct conflicts.

Multilateralism - Active participation in international organizations.

¹Robert Keohane, Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics, International Organization, Vol. 23, 1969.

²Inis L. Claude, Swords into Plowshares: The Problems and Progress of International Organization, Random House, 1971.

Thus, small states are not just "victims" of international policy. On the contrary, their strategic flexibility places them a special role in the international system.³

Chapter II - Peculiarities of the Multi -Polled System

The multi-polar system implies that there are several major law enforcement centers in international politics that have more or less equal impact. Historically such a system existed in nineteenth -century Europe, where Britain, France, Austria, Russia and Prussia were balanced.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the world became bipolar (US and Soviet Union), and after the end of the Cold War-single-polar (US hegemony). However, since the beginning of the 21st century, the signs of multi -polar order are clearly evident: China is growing rapidly, Russia is trying to revise the policy, the EU is actively fighting for global acting, and regional forces (India, Turkey, Brazil) also have an impact.

The peculiarities of the multipolar system are as follows:

1. Constant search of balance - The balance of power is more dynamic than in the bipolar system.⁴
2. Diversity of Partnerships - States can simultaneously partnership with several forces.
3. Security dilemma - Small states are particularly vulnerable, as the confrontation of large forces often affects their territory.
4. The importance of multilateralism - international organizations become "security networks".

For the Baltic states, the multi -polar system is a mutual reality: on the one hand, they feel threatened by Russia, on the other hand, have the opportunity to get involved in the Western alliances and thereby strengthen their positions.

³Raimo Vayrynen, *Small States in Different Theoretical Traditions of International Relations*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 1997.

⁴Anders Wivel, *The Security Challenge of Small EU Member States: Interests, Identity and the Development of the EU as a Security Actor*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2005.

Chapter III - Historical Context of Foreign Policy of the Baltic States

Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are geographically located in a space that has been a competition for great forces for centuries.

Soviet period - In 1940, the Baltic states were combined with the Soviet Union. After World War II, they existed for almost 50 years as the Soviet republics, where independent foreign policy was impossible.

Restoration of Independence - After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Baltic states first demanded full independence. Their main purpose was to free Soviet influence and integrate into Western structures.

Euro-Atlantic Integration-In 2004, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia simultaneously became members of the European Union and NATO. This event has become a key success of their foreign policy because they have obtained solid security guarantees.⁵

Modern challenges - Russia's aggressive policy (the 2008 war in Georgia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the War of 2022) further increasing the sense of insecurity in the Baltic states.

The main goals of foreign policy of the Baltic states are:

1. Security through NATO;
2. Deepening economic integration into the EU;
3. Development of regional cooperation (with Northern European countries, Poland);
4. Supporting democratic values in the post -Soviet space.

These countries have managed to successfully use the strategic flexibility of small states: they quickly integrated into Western structures, relying on solid security networks, and developing their own national identity.

Chapter IV - Strategic Maneuvers in Multipolar System

The foreign policy of the Baltic states is often described as an example of "strategic flexibility". They are small states, but their geopolitical location forced them to become an active participant in global processes. Strategies for maneuvering the Baltic states can be divided into several areas:

⁵Natalia Bugayova, Russia's Strategic Objectives in the Baltic Region, Institute for the Study of War, 2019.

1. Relieve security alliances

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, as small states, are unable to independently secure their own security. That is why NATO membership is the main basis for a strategic maneuver. NATO is not only a military guarantee, but also a political instrument that enables them to participate in decision -making.⁶

The Baltic states are trying to maximize NATO's presence in their territory: permanent military training, NATO combat groups, and temporary dislocation of American military contingent are their "fundamental buffer".

2. Economic and energy diversification

Energy dependents on Russia have been considered one of the main weaknesses of the Baltic states in the past. However, for the last two decades they have implemented the radical reforms of the energy sector: Lithuania has been built in the Lithuanian natural gas terminal (Klaipėda LNG Terminal), allowing the country to receive gas from Norway and other sources. The decision was a strategic maneuver that reduced the risk of Russian energy -dents.

3. Use of "soft force"

The Baltic states are trying to play their role as advocates of democracy and human rights in the post -Soviet space. They are actively supporting Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia's European integration processes. It is a "soft power" tool that enhances their international authority and enhances Western unity.

4. Digital diplomacy and innovations

Estonia, as a "digital state", has become one of the leaders in the field of e-government. Estonia experience is used as an "innovative soft power". The country's successful digital transformation has become an instrument of foreign policy that strengthens its reputation as a small but high -tech actor.⁷

⁶Inis L. Claude, *Swords into Plowshares: The Problems and Progress of International Organization*, Random House, 1971.

⁷Anders Wivel, *The Security Challenge of Small EU Member States: Interests, Identity and the Development of the EU as a Security Actor*, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2005.

5. Regional Partnership

The Baltic states are constantly trying to strengthen cooperation with Scandinavian countries and Poland. This partnership creates "Northern European Security Architecture", which is relatively more sustainable than the policy of a particular state.

Thus, the strategic maneuvers of the Baltic states are based on a "combination of flexibility": military alliances, economic diversification, soft power and regional cooperation.

Chapter V - Regional Safety and Cooperation

One of the main pillars of foreign policy of the Baltic states is integration into regional security mechanisms.

1. NATO's role

NATO is the main guarantor of the Baltic Security security. The principle of collective defense (Article 5) gives them the hope of military defense. However, the Baltic states themselves are trying not to be "recipients" in NATO - they are actively involved in international missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and other regions. This gives them the status of an "active player", which increases their security guarantees.

2. The EU as an additional security tool

The EU was originally an economic union, but in the 21st century it was on the agenda. The Baltic states are actively using the EU's foreign policy and security policy opportunities, especially sanctions against Russia.⁸

3. Northern European Cooperation

The Baltic states regularly cooperate with Norway, Sweden and Finland. This cooperation includes both military training and economic and energy projects. Particularly noteworthy is the "Nordic-Baltic Eight" (NB8) format, which creates a unified regional platform.

⁸Robert Keohane, Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics, International Organization, Vol. 23, 1969.

4. Transatlantic relationships

The role of the US in the safety of the Baltic states is crucial. Periodic placement of American military bases in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia is a clear signal to Russia that any aggressive action will instantly lead to a response.

5. Hybrid Threats and Cyber Security

The Baltic states, especially Estonia, are severe hybrid threats - cyberattacks, misinformation, propaganda.⁹ It is in Estonia that NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Center of Excellence, CCDCoe) is located in Estonia, which makes the region a global leader in cyber security.

Thus, regional security for the Baltic states is not only military defense but also economic integration, energy independence and cyber security.

Chapter VI - Theoretical Interpretations and Comparative Analysis

Experience in the Baltic States can be discussed according to various theoretical perspectives of international relations.

1. Realism

In terms of realistic theory, small states are trying to protect themselves from the aggression of great forces. In the Baltic example, this is manifested in the NATO military alliance.

2. Liberalism

Liberalism emphasizes the importance of international institutions. The Baltic States are an example of a liberal approach: the EU, NATO, regional formats create a "net" of security for them.

3. Constructivism

Constructivism shows that the foreign policy of the Baltic states is not only determined by the balance of power - it plays a major role in identity. The Baltic states perceive themselves as the "part of the West" and actively argue with this identity at the political level.

⁹Raimo Vayrynen, *Small States in Different Theoretical Traditions of International Relations*, Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 1997.

4. Comparative analysis with other small states

Israel - Despite a small territory, a strategy based on military strength.

Singapore - Strategy based on economic and financial strength.

Baltic States - Strategy based on alliances and international institutions.

Comparative analysis shows that the Baltic states effectively use "multilateralism" as a main tool.

Conclusion

The experience of the Baltic states clearly shows that small states have not only played the role of "weak actors" in the international system. They have the ability to defend their interests through strategic maneuvering, create solid security networks, and influence regional policy.¹⁰ The multi -polar world creates both threats and opportunities for small states. Baltic countries use these opportunities:

NATO and EU membership gives them security guarantees;

Energy diversification reduces the risk of external pressure;

"Soft power" and digital innovations increase their international authority;

Regional cooperation creates a unified North-Baltic Space, which is much more sustainable than a particular state policy.

Theoretical analysis shows that the Baltic states use both realistic, liberal and constructivist strategies at the same time. This reaffirms that the policy of small states is flexible and complex.

Thus, the Baltic states show that the role of a small state in the multipolar system is not only "passive". With the right strategy, they become not only regional but also international actors that affect global order.

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