



Research Article

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The Security strategy of small states in the 21st Century and beyond

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Abstract

In the 21st century, small countries continue to face a distinct set of challenges that shape their security strategies. Despite ongoing constraints in military resources, the lack of strategic depth, and vulnerabilities due to their geographic location, new global trends post-2020 have added complexity to their security dynamics. These challenges include the rise of cyber warfare, shifts in the geopolitical balance of power, the global spread of pandemics, increasing international economic interdependence, and strategic competition between major powers, particularly in regions such as the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe.

With the continued emergence of hybrid threats—ranging from cyberattacks to disinformation campaigns—small nations are adapting by strengthening their cyber capabilities, developing robust civil defense systems, and enhancing multilateral cooperation within international organizations. Furthermore, these countries are seeking strategic alliances to offset their military disadvantages, leveraging economic partnerships and adopting technological advancements to bolster resilience.

This article examines how small countries are adjusting their security strategies to navigate these contemporary global shifts. By balancing military, political, and economic resources, these nations are adopting a more nuanced approach to their national security, increasingly focused on flexibility, adaptability, and regional cooperation. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of global health security and the role of small nations in international governance, underscoring the interconnectedness of modern security concerns.

Keywords: small states, security, strategy, environment, geopolitics, cyber, technology, complexity; alliance.

1. Introduction

Small countries have traditionally navigated the international system from a position of relative vulnerability. With fewer resources than larger states and often located

in geopolitically sensitive regions, their security is frequently at risk from both external threats and internal instability. Small states became a distinct category in international relations after the definition of “Great Powers” during the Congress of Vienna (November 1814 to June 1815). However, it was not until the 1960s, with the publication of Baker (1959), that small states emerged as a distinct area of research within the field of international relations.

Interest in small states and the importance of size in international relations gradually waned by the mid-1980s. However, following the Cold War, interest in small states began to rise again, particularly with the second wave of small state formation that followed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. Changes in the international system after the Cold War opened up more opportunities for small states to engage more actively in various fields and issues, enhancing their presence on the global stage.

In the 21st century, the rise of globalization, digital warfare, and the reshaping of traditional alliances have introduced both new challenges and new opportunities for small nations. In this rapidly changing global environment, small countries must redefine their strategies, emphasizing innovation, diplomacy, and resilience, while avoiding direct confrontation with more powerful states.

2. Geopolitical and strategic context for small Countries in the 21st Century

In the trajectory of movements, changes, conflicts, and influences happening globally today, security is one of the most affected aspects. It is well known that the general state of security has changed significantly over the last decade (Viano, 1999). According to Havel (1994) the community, regions, and national sovereignty have meaning only if they stem from the true sovereignty, which he defines as “human sovereignty. Traditional threats have faded and been replaced by new, far more dangerous challenges, such as terrorism, illegal trafficking, corruption, and organized crime. These actions have resulted in severe consequences, not only for human life but also for economic and political instability, including the security of states with fragile democracies. Hence, troubled security is a product of a troubled world.

Apart from the changes in the progress of some Western Balkan countries and Eastern Europe following the transformations in the 1990s, challenges such as social unrest, anarchy, violence, constitutional violations, and even threats to national security and regional integrity emerged. Based on the analysis of these developments, we can conclude that security evolves as a reflection of a changing world.

Nowadays, the security of small countries is undergoing a profound transformation, increasingly influenced by global shifts in power. The era of traditional superpower dominance has evolved, accompanied by the rise of new threats that extend beyond the military realm. Economic, technological, and cyber threats are playing an increasingly important role in shaping global security, adding complexity to the challenges faced by small states. These countries often find themselves caught in the middle of rivalries between great powers, such as the United States and China, which

have opposing interests, as well as pressure from regional powers vying for influence in strategically important regions, including the Western Balkans.

In this context, small countries are no longer solely focused on traditional defense and security. They are also confronting more sophisticated threats, such as cyberattacks that can undermine critical infrastructure and destabilize the state without direct military force. Hybrid warfare, a blend of tactics including disinformation, public opinion manipulation, and cyberattacks, has become an increasingly present threat for these states. Furthermore, dependence on larger powers for defense and trade makes them vulnerable, as shifts in international politics can become unpredictable and jeopardize their internal stability.

For example, small countries in regions like Eastern Europe and particularly the Western Balkans are facing growing pressure from Russia and China, respectively. They are forced to make difficult decisions regarding alignment with great powers politically, economically, or militarily. This could mean joining a military alliance such as NATO, as Albania has done, risking conflict with states that view such alliances as a threat to their interests. Alternatively, some states may attempt to maintain a neutral position, seeking balance between competing great powers in order to preserve their autonomy and security.

A major challenge and a smart approach for small countries are the recent technological developments, which are being applied in the fields of defense and security. Technological advancements have been pivotal in transforming the world and society throughout history, reaching their zenith during the late twentieth century's computer age and the subsequent information age of the twenty-first century. These transformations have been instrumental in promoting human welfare, and, in many ways, they have contributed to an increase in individual freedom. However, it is important to note that these advancements have not come without violent disruptions and upheavals.

The pace of these technological developments has often been a double-edged sword: while they have facilitated progress in many areas, such as communication, healthcare, education, and economic productivity, they have also led to periods of turbulence, resistance, and conflict. As new technologies emerge, existing power structures are often challenged, which can provoke violent reactions from those whose status or interests are threatened by these changes.

Humanity now seems to be in the midst of another truly historic transformation, one that promises to disrupt the existing order yet again. As with previous technological shifts, it is expected that this transformation will provoke violent responses, especially from groups or individuals who are struggling to adapt to or resist the changes. Nonetheless, the hope is that these disruptions will ultimately lead to a new human state—one marked by greater productivity, freedom, and well-being for individuals and society as a whole.

This ongoing transformation is likely to have profound implications for various sectors, including international relations and security alliances. In particular, the general trends of this transformation could impact NATO in several ways. As

technology continues to advance, NATO may find itself confronted with new challenges and opportunities. These could include the increasing importance of cybersecurity, the potential for new forms of warfare (such as cyberattacks or AI-driven military technologies), and the changing dynamics of global power that result from technological shifts.

The future of NATO, in particular, may be influenced by the ways in which member states adapt to and harness these technological changes. "The alliance could face challenges in terms of defense strategies, the integration of emerging technologies into military operations, and the alignment of its collective security goals with the rapid pace of technological innovation" (Open publication, 2023). Additionally, NATO may need to address the ethical, political, and economic implications of these advancements, especially when it comes to issues like surveillance, privacy, and the role of artificial intelligence in military decision-making.

In sum, while the ongoing technological transformation holds promise for enhancing individual and societal well-being, it also brings with it significant risks and challenges. As history has shown, each major technological shift has disrupted existing systems, often leading to violent resistance before achieving a new equilibrium. This time, the changes will likely reshape not only human life but also global alliances like NATO, which will have to navigate the opportunities and dangers that come with these innovations. The hope remains that these shifts will ultimately lead to a more productive, free, and prosperous world for all.

In this context, the strategies of small countries must adapt to ensure survival through various means. A key aspect of these strategies is smart diplomacy, which may involve maneuvering between great powers, capitalizing on opportunities they offer, while maintaining a balance between them. In some cases, this includes efforts to play great powers against each other to secure a favorable position in international relations, maximizing benefits and minimizing risks to national security.

Thus, small countries are developing a new strategic approach, where flexibility and adaptability are essential for managing both internal and external pressures.

Nye's (2025) concept of "soft power" has become crucial for understanding how states, particularly smaller ones, can exert influence without relying solely on military force. For these states, influencing international outcomes increasingly depends on economic, technological, and diplomatic resources rather than just military strength. As hard power becomes less dominant, smaller states must strategically balance these resources to maintain their autonomy. They face new challenges, such as cyber threats, hybrid warfare, and dependence on larger states for defense and trade, in addition to traditional security concerns like territorial defense.

3. Small states and security challenges

Small states, though diverse in cultural, historical, and social contexts, share common development challenges and vulnerabilities. These include: Security and Economic Weaknesses; Geographic Isolation; Global Openness and Dependence; Natural

Disaster Vulnerability: Limited Economic Diversification; Poverty and Inequality; Limited Capacity.

Despite these challenges, the 21st century offers new opportunities for small states, particularly through international integration, such as Euro-Atlantic membership. This has improved security by reducing the threat of military invasion and provided small states with a platform to express their interests globally.

However, small states still face existential threats, including territorial security concerns, internal conflicts (ethnic, social, religious), poverty, organized crime, corruption, poor governance, and environmental degradation. Sovereignty, security, and maintaining civil order remain key priorities, and some small states are addressing these issues through regional cooperation, like the Balkans example.

In the past, security was mainly handled by major government institutions and experts. Small and medium-sized states were often vulnerable, as seen during the Cold War with superpower rivalries and conflicts over geopolitical interests. Great Powers have historically manipulated weaker states economically and militarily. However, today, small states like Switzerland, Israel, Singapore, and Kosovo have not only survived but thrived alongside larger nations.

In the late 20th century, during the 1990s, the primary strategic challenge for post-communist states was adapting to the new security environment, expressed through their ambition to join the EU and NATO. Their dilemma in the early years of transition was complicated by the cultural and political divisions that existed between the "West" and the "East." These political trends, particularly among small states aiming to become an integrated part of Europe to which they belonged, became less significant after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Some scholars have argued that the new world order minimizes the security risks for small states, and that threats have become international in nature, with the primary targets being great powers.

The reality today is that small states face only one strategic solution: Euro-Atlantic integration. In general, the common security and defense project was conceived by the major European powers, but the goal of becoming part of the system was the main driving force that compelled nearly all small states to integrate together (Arunas, 2006).

For several decades, the concept of sovereignty and independence for small states has gone through various stages of progress, with changes occurring over time. Small and powerless states before World War I often became victims of the Great Powers. World War I and President Wilson marked a shift in the traditional behavior of the Great Powers toward small states, with the principle of "freedom for all." Wilson's theory emphasized the right of every people to independence. This new concept provided support for small states, which seemed impossible in the political climate at the time. However, due to the economic difficulties of small states, there were only minimal changes to their status.

The right of small states to live independently is a fundamental principle. Freedom is inherent to all states, not just a privilege granted by great powers. The world

wars highlighted the need for small states to actively seek peace and independence. The end of colonialism and the creation of the United Nations after World War II provided small states with the opportunity to embrace this right to freedom and independences.

However, there were also disappointments, such as the case of Kosovo, where independence was nothing more than a hopeless utopia. This happened in Yugoslavia, which Misha Glenny, in his book, *The History of the Balkans 1804-1999: Nationalism, Wars and the Great Powers*, calls the "Impossible Place." He further argues that "Few European states have faced such tangled difficulties as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, which emerged from the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Its constitution was proclaimed on June 28, 1921... a date that warmed the hearts of Serbs, as it reminded them of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, as well as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 (Glenny, 2017).

Self-determination remains a relatively new trend in history and contemporary political developments. The most significant example of this is the state of Kosovo. However, at least in Europe, small states, in order to preserve their independence, ensure security, and foster economic growth and stability, are oriented toward integration as the prevailing trend of our time.

The difference between the states that managed to survive and those that perished lies in the fact that some small states survived due to their commitment, which led them toward their goal—military defense. He who desires peace must prepare for war.

Developing a reliable defensive force remains one of the best means of ensuring security from external threats. Preventive military measures against aggression are among the most challenging issues concerning the security and preservation of a state's independence.

The decision to use force carries equal responsibility to avoiding aggression. Defensive forces are key to ensuring peace, with their size and effectiveness shaped by resources and foreign policies. Small states should focus on building a professional, mobile force and maintaining economic resilience. Nations like Israel, Switzerland, Taiwan, and Singapore have well-equipped, well-financed forces that deter threats. Quality—mobility, morale, preparation, and equipment—compensates for smaller size. Some rely on internal resources for modern weapons, while others produce or modify arms. Public support for defense is crucial for national unity. Small states, facing historical and ongoing threats from neighbors and great powers, must prioritize security to protect citizens and ensure stability. Conflicts often arise in or near small, vulnerable states.

If a state is small and economically weak, and politically unstable, it will struggle to maintain any form of sovereignty, as it is largely dependent on other states and even "blackmailed" whenever the interests of other states require it. As a result, small states often attempt to invest in and strengthen their security apparatus, while also striving for a stable economic well-being and preserving it. Friendly policies of small states are often important, but they are not crucial. When certain geostrategic interests

arise, small states are the first to bear the brunt of attacks from opposing parties. Investments in the military, police, and intelligence sectors have often been successful in maintaining a balance of power for small states. However, if these efforts are not supported by policies for economic development, they struggle to carry the full burden of security. This is because modern developments in military and police technologies require continuous investments, and small states increasingly find it difficult to cope with this challenge.

For small states, the best, and often the only, way out of this situation is through membership in various military alliances and economic-military blocs. This is because such membership has specific requirements for acceptance, but also guarantees sovereignty and the protection of borders. The principle of NATO is that if any member state's sovereignty is violated, the response to this challenge will be collective.

4. Military strategies and defenses of small states in the modern era

Cyber Defense and Information Warfare: The emergence of cyber capabilities has radically transformed military strategy for nations, including small states. With the increasing frequency of cyber-attacks, these countries have adapted by prioritizing cyber security as an essential aspect of their national defense. As noted by Rid (2025), cyber-attacks now pose an existential threat capable of destabilizing governments and societies without the need for traditional military confrontations. Estonia, for example, has become a global leader in cyber defense, developing one of the most sophisticated cybersecurity infrastructures. The nation has made substantial investments in digital military resources, proving that safeguarding cyberspace is as crucial for national security as defending physical borders.

The concept of cyber deterrence, promoted by experts like David Sanger, emphasizes that small states can use the capability to launch counter-cyber-attacks or disrupt an adversary's digital infrastructure as a powerful strategic tool. During conflicts, cyber capabilities allow smaller countries to balance the power dynamic, making it more challenging for larger states to impose their will without risking substantial digital retaliation.

Asymmetric Warfare and Non-Linear Strategies: Due to the limited access to conventional military power, many small states have turned to asymmetric warfare as a feasible strategy. Michael Evans explains that this approach exploits the weaknesses of more powerful adversaries through unconventional means. Without large standing armies, smaller nations rely on specialized military units skilled in guerrilla tactics and covert operations. These forces can implement cost-effective, high-impact strategies, such as sabotage and ambushes, to disrupt the operations of stronger enemies.

Drone technology and unmanned systems have become crucial in this new landscape. As P.W. Singer discusses in *Wired for War*, drones provide smaller nations with an efficient, low-cost method for surveillance and defense. By utilizing drones, these states can avoid the high costs and risks associated with manned military interventions

while maintaining plausible deniability in their actions.

Additionally, cyber-attacks serve as an equalizer in asymmetric warfare. Countries like Israel, with its advanced cybersecurity infrastructure, demonstrate that cyber tactics can disrupt the operations of far larger adversaries. Cyber-attacks—such as data breaches, denial-of-service attacks, or sabotage of critical infrastructure—allow small nations to inflict significant costs on their enemies without engaging in direct combat.

These non-linear strategies, including cyber operations, sabotage, and information warfare, are increasingly effective in modern conflicts where large-scale military engagements are often replaced by indirect forms of action. This approach enables small states to defend their sovereignty with minimal financial and human costs compared to traditional military strategies.

In conclusion, small states in the 21st century must adopt a multifaceted security strategy that combines traditional military tactics with cutting-edge technology. By leveraging cyber defense, asymmetric warfare, and diplomatic efforts, these nations can navigate the complexities of global politics and secure their position on the world stage.

5. International relations in small states and security challenges

History has shown that it is relatively easy for great powers to manipulate small states economically and militarily, thereby jeopardizing their security. A small state is often incapable of managing a conflict on its own. Therefore, small states rely primarily on diplomatic efforts, participation in international institutions, and the creation of alliances—especially with major powers—to avoid or minimize the risk of conflict. To mitigate insecurity, the strategic solution for small states, such as those in the Western Balkans, including Albania and Kosovo, for example, is Euro-Atlantic integration.

The concept of collective security and defense was originally promoted by major European powers. The primary goal of positioning themselves within the international system led nearly all small states to join these projects and initiatives. The key difference between those states that managed to survive and those that disappeared is that some succeeded by committing to align themselves with their desired goal: military protection. Those who desire peace must be prepared for war. Military deterrence actions against aggression represent the biggest security challenge, and the decision to use force when necessary is as responsible and important as preventing aggressors.

In parallel with their development, small new states have focused on security, which remains a broad field of study and debate for many scholars and analysts, as it is a fundamental requirement for human and societal existence and development. This is because national security is closely linked to citizens' trust in the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity, core values, and national interests.

Today, debates revolve around economic security, identity, ecology, food, and more.

Furthermore, the distinction between external and internal security has diminished, with the geography of security becoming more regional and local, based on different geopolitical states and regions.

In foreign policy, small states, including those in the Western Balkans, lack some of the key sources of power—such as military, economic, and political potential—that larger states possess, which gives them a strong position in international relations. On the other hand, international law treats all states equally in international relations, regardless of their size. This equality is primarily reflected in procedural aspects. In everyday international relations, small states continually face limitations imposed by their limited access to essential power resources.

However, some small states have managed to establish a respected and influential position in international relations, primarily by focusing on specific foreign policy objectives and using their unique available potential strategically. Israel, Switzerland, and Austria have managed to become influential players in international relations despite their small size. Belgium and Luxembourg, also small states, are key players within the European Union.

At the same time, the international system is undergoing changes in many aspects, opening up more opportunities for small states to act. These new international circumstances make it easier for small states to gain a respected position and pursue their foreign policy interests, especially when their foreign policy priorities are carefully defined and aligned with existing opportunities. Small states now have more space to influence decision-making in various international organizations. The foreign policy characteristics of small states include a focus on specific territories, geographical limitations, increasing interest in regional alliances, and participation in international organizations, particularly those related to security. The foreign policy of small states tends to favor neutral positions on international issues not directly related to their vital interests and seeks to find powerful and reliable allies. These states often use their unique geostrategic location to build special relationships with powerful actors in international relations and to create alliances with other similar states in the region.

Good relations with neighboring states and adaptation to integration processes are crucial for the foreign policy of small states. The tools available to small states for implementing foreign policy are more limited. These states typically rely on diplomacy as their primary tool for foreign policy execution, particularly certain forms of diplomacy that are more effective for their foreign policy objectives. The use of soft power is essential for small states (Fazlliu, 2013).

Small states face significant challenges in foreign policy, worsened by evolving global dynamics in recent years. A major issue is the lack of professional diplomatic staff, making coordination difficult as individuals are forced to take on multiple roles. Diplomatic services are often overburdened, managing both foreign policy and inter-institutional relations. Additionally, the disconnect between foreign ministries and academic or think-tank institutions weakens policy planning, leaving small states vulnerable in complex areas like climate change, cybersecurity, and regional stability.

The reliance on personal connections over professional competence in selecting diplomats further undermines the effectiveness of foreign policy.

Financial constraints limit small states' ability to pursue an ambitious foreign policy and establish a strong global presence. With fewer resources, they focus on key alliances, often with larger powers or international organizations. Additionally, the lack of funding for continuous diplomatic training hinders the development of skilled diplomats, limiting their effectiveness in global discussions. Small states have learned the importance of preparation and strategic planning. As Former diplomat and Slovenian foreign policy scholar Ernest Petrič notes, their influence relies on strong arguments and clear diplomatic strategies, particularly as they increasingly use soft power—through diplomacy and multilateralism—to achieve their goals.

Kosovo, as a new state in the international system, exemplifies the challenges and opportunities faced by small states in recent years. In the context of Kosovo, foreign policy planning is essential to prioritize a select few specific interests and make optimal use of limited resources. Kosovo's foreign policy has been shaped by its desire for wider international recognition and integration into global institutions like the United Nations. It has drawn on lessons from other small states that have successfully navigated international relations to develop a foreign policy that seeks both recognition and stability in a complex geopolitical landscape.

Over the past five years, small states have increasingly focused on enhancing their diplomatic agility. With rising global tensions, particularly due to the war in Ukraine, increasing Sino-American rivalry, and growing cyber threats, smaller states have sought to carve out niches in international politics by aligning themselves with larger regional powers and multilateral organizations. As new global challenges emerge, such as the rise of cyber warfare, climate diplomacy, and migration crises, the need for small states to engage diplomatically and strategically has become more urgent.

While there remains no clear consensus on the exact definition of small states, the distinction between "very small," "small," and "middle powers" remains fluid and subjective. However, over the last few years, several characteristics of small states have become clearer. These include limited military and economic capacity, reliance on multilateralism, and the prioritization of soft power. Small states must continually adapt to the shifting geopolitical environment, whether through regional alliances, participation in global institutions, or strategic bilateral relationships. These strategies allow them to punch above their weight in international relations, despite the challenges they face in terms of resources, diplomatic capacity, and global influence. In summary, small states continue to adapt their foreign policies to navigate an increasingly complex international landscape. By focusing on strategic alliances, prioritizing key interests, and enhancing the professionalism of their diplomatic services, these states can more effectively influence global outcomes despite the challenges posed by their size and limited resources. The ability of small states to manage these challenges will determine their success in the evolving world order over the coming years.

6. Diplomacy of small states in national security: The case of Albania

For small states, the key to safeguarding and advancing their vital national interests lies in determining their foreign policy approach. The notion of neutrality in international relations has evolved considerably, and analysts agree that its future in a globalized world remains uncertain. Austria and Switzerland, traditionally seen as neutral states, have begun to adopt positions that no longer fully align with the traditional definition of neutrality. Diplomacy, as the art of reconciliation, plays a crucial role in helping small states mitigate external threats. As such, while a small state may lack the military capability to engage in direct conflict, its best option is often to rely on diplomatic efforts, or “diplomatic warfare,” to prevent or minimize the risk of conflict.

Neutral diplomacy has been applied by countries like Finland, Singapore, Switzerland, and many microstates in the Pacific and the Caribbean. However, challenges have been observed, as in some cases the desire for understanding and good neighborly relations is seen as a weakness. This principle holds value for both small and large states. The difference is that states with powerful militaries can confront global political challenges, and if their military potential for defending national security is supported by powerful states, as is the case with Taiwan. The strong engagement and concerns of some countries to secure neutrality have led to increased respect from powerful states. However, neutral policy should not degenerate into pacifist theory, especially in today’s world, where the complexity of the security environment and the intertwining of traditional and non-traditional risks are greater than ever.

Diplomacy must be supported by a reliable Armed Force. This is embodied in Roosevelt’s theory of using diplomacy in difficult situations. Therefore, the combination of diplomacy with defense capabilities is more than just a reason for small states to cooperate with other countries to ensure peace. The only way to avoid insecurity—something that small states face more than larger ones in the context of international relations—is through their involvement in international institutions. In this way, they serve two functions: first, they “counter” the rigid positions of large states by implementing common rules and principles that apply to all, and second, they express their opinions and stances on important issues that are in the national interest of small states. Even where the weight of votes is asymmetrical (such as in the UN, where only permanent members of the Security Council have veto power), small states can still exert significant influence, even if these institutions did not exist (Anders, 2005). This means that the position of small states in international relations can be expressed through their tendency for collective action in addressing security issues, particularly with regard to their internationalization (Talavs, 1995). For small states integrated into European structures, it is important that the EU has developed a Common Security and Defense Policy.

The shift toward an integration model, especially for small states, after the end of World War II, stemmed from the fact that the EU was the only organization

addressing all the necessary aspects to strengthen political and economic stability. The non-military character of this union has portrayed the EU as a “soft power” and created opportunities for small states to avoid marginalization in international relations while simultaneously protecting their national identity.

Membership in regional organizations institutionalizes relations between small states on a regional basis in the fields of economics and security, while also determining the foundation of this cooperation. Through common policies, the EU has created a political platform that helps its small member states exert influence both within and beyond their region, much more easily than if acting individually (Anders, 2005).

The European Union (EU) is crucial for the foreign activities of small states, as it allows them to engage in a unified manner on the international stage. According to Wivel (2005) small states traditionally have a privileged position in the EU. He explains this by noting that, due to institutional agreements within the main EU bodies (the Council, the Commission, and Parliament), small states exercise influence that is, in fact, disproportionately large compared to their potential. On the other hand, Magnette and Calypso (2003) argue that a distinction should be made between small and large states.

In order to secure peace, small states must use an alternative approach, namely their universal involvement in security matters. In principle, they always respond as a group of states striving to initiate differentiated integration. A careful analysis of the policy-making methodology in the three pillars of the EU shows, however, that in such situations, there is a potential for greater risks to emerge for small states. The strategy of power balancing is essential, and it requires that all major states, both from the east and the west, exert economic influence over the existence of small and medium-sized states. Potentially the most dangerous situation for a small state arises from integrations within the second pillar of the European Union, which regulates common foreign policy and security. The issue here concerns the existence of so-called “forced cooperation,” illustrated by the fact that it is sufficient for the interested parties to notify only the competent European institutions, and then they act without needing their permission.

Disregarding the objections of small states, the current history of the EU shows the presence of informal groups of large states. The Contact Group for Bosnia and Herzegovina and later for Kosovo is an example of such an action, alongside a large grouping of influences, even semi-transparent, called the “Quint,” which consists of France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, and a non-EU member state, the United States (Gegout, 2002).

To address this issue in a more balanced way and to provide a clear view of how the EU functions and operates, it is necessary to highlight several examples where small states are also grouped based on similarities. For instance, the Nordic states initiated what is known as the Northern Dimension of the European Union.¹

The Baltic States, as a group, are active in peacekeeping operations. The so-called

¹ NDI is defined as a cross-border politics of EU and Russia and the Arctic region which was raised by the initiative of Scandinavian states, EU members.

Visegrad Four (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) have established institutional frameworks for cooperation in economics and trade, while the Benelux countries, with their customs union since 1944, were de facto precursors to the European Economic Union (EEU). Specifically, the alliance of small state groups cannot set a precedent or disadvantage the EU, and they should not be accused of undermining its internal cohesion, as their activities align with EU democratic values and its Foreign and Security Policy. In the case of the Western Balkans, the union of its countries through regional initiatives and the common approach to integration has been initiated by the EU and NATO, and is in the interest of fulfilling the standards for accession to these two structures.

From its establishment to the end of the 20th century, Albania's security strategy focused on leveraging alliances with Great Powers to protect its national interests. Albanian leadership, recognizing the country's weakness, sought support from regional and major powers, often forming asymmetric alliances that varied in success. Aligning with a Great Power helped Albania avoid economic collapse and military threats, though it sometimes required sacrifices in sovereignty. Under Enver Hoxha, Albania took a sharp turn with a policy of complete isolation, cutting off all external influences. Post-Cold War, Albania's challenge remains whether to align with a major power due to its ongoing state weakness, which has hindered its political, economic, and social development. Despite focusing on national defense, Albania's self-isolation led it to renounce external support, relying solely on its own resources.

Surprisingly, the political leadership of the time believed that Albania, despite being a small country with limited human and economic resources, could manage to withstand and even prevail against a potential enemy far superior in numbers and power. This belief was based on the idea that, unlike other countries, Albania was forming a People's Army with unity and a high sense of patriotism. Albania's strategic goals—defending its freedom and independence at the time—did not rely on external help or international circumstances, but entirely on internal factors: the strength, patriotism, and bravery of its people, as well as the armament and overall preparation of the military, and the high and permanent readiness of the Armed Forces (FA).

Under the psychological influence of the Cold War and in line with the political concept of the time—self-isolation—the Albanian army underwent a series of changes, mainly concerning its enormous size. By the early 1990s, the military alone counted 61,000 active personnel (over 2% of the population), 360,000 reservists, and over 200,000 territorial volunteer forces, not to mention armed youth, student, and school formations. Additionally, in line with the main principles of the country's defense, "inch by inch," the army had not only barracks but also 2,200 opening points and garrisons spread across the entire country (Ribaj, 2018). Under the motto "Everything for defense, everything for victory," in 1975, the fortification of Albania began, continuing until 1985, when the dictator Enver Hoxha passed away (Çelaj, 2015).

In the realm of security studies, which are typically focused on military issues, most

former communist countries saw a gradual decline in the pressure and control exerted by the communist state. However, in Albania, the situation was the opposite. Especially after the 1970s, the state's control became even more stringent, which caused military studies to become disconnected from contemporary developments. This shift led to an emphasis, even an idealization, of national values. Archival materials, libraries, and research findings suggest that military scholars in Albania sought to "rediscover" and emphasize the importance of an "authentic" military tradition. Much like their civilian counterparts, they adhered rigidly to the historical narrative of "traditional Albanian resistance for survival," rarely considering anything outside of Albania's historical context. During the communist era, military studies, along with all other social sciences, were completely isolated from outside influences.

The education and training system imposed by the leadership profoundly impacted my generation, particularly our predecessors, though younger colleagues and students were less affected. We were conditioned to prepare for wars with multiple adversaries, but the real threat was often unclear. Anyone offering a different perspective faced severe consequences. After participating in numerous exercises and military training, many of us came to realize that the goal of such a "war" lacked logical justification. This was not unique to Albania—leadership shaped education, research, and military doctrine, influencing our thinking, organization, and strategic development. Today, we see the lasting consequences of those political directives and military doctrines.

The end of the Cold War brought about significant changes to the global security agenda, expanding the range of issues facing the international community. In Albania, the re-establishment of democracy and the restoration of U.S.-Albanian relations led to the recovery of its security sector, with early signs of progress despite ongoing fluctuations during the transition period. Albania's shift toward democratic transformation after 1991 naturally influenced its security policies. This was reflected in the introduction of new concepts and concrete steps—particularly political and diplomatic ones—toward enhancing security.

In the early months of 1992, Albania was one of the first countries to apply for NATO membership. In February 1994, it signed the Partnership for Peace Framework, and by April 1999, it became an aspiring NATO member at the Washington Summit. Albania officially joined NATO as an ally in April 2009.

Between 1997 and 1999, Albania faced a tumultuous period in its security sector, marked by internal uprisings and the brutal final phase of Serb nationalist aggression in Kosovo. However, after 2000, Albania made substantial progress in implementing security reforms. Efforts were focused on broadening the narrow military security model toward a more complex, integrated security approach that encompasses state security along with social, political, economic, human, and environmental security. This shift marked a transition from self-defense to collective security under NATO, as well as integration into the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) within the EU.

The shift from Cold War-era security, which focused on traditional, conventional, and symmetric threats, to a post-Cold War, 21st-century security model focused on

non-traditional and asymmetric risks represents a significant evolution in Albania's security strategy.

"The foreign policy of the Republic of Albania is one of the most important instruments of its national security".² In the current international security landscape, Albania remains a key and committed player in maintaining regional peace and stability.

Today, Albania views its security as inextricably linked to Euro-Atlantic security, in accordance with the provisions of the North Atlantic Treaty. On the 15th anniversary of its NATO membership and the 75th anniversary of the founding of the North Atlantic Alliance, Albania remains a committed and reliable ally in the world's longest-lasting and most powerful alliance, which now includes 32 member countries.

Increased investments in defense also serve to enhance the capabilities of allied forces, improve readiness, and boost contributions to NATO missions and operations. On March 4, 2024, Albania inaugurated the first NATO tactical airbase in the Western Balkans, marking a significant transformation of the Kuçova Air Base. This strategic investment, along with other projects such as the Porto Romano port development, strengthens regional security and beyond. By enhancing NATO's mobility and operational support, these projects will be beneficial for the Western Balkans and Black Sea regions, which are of strategic importance to the Alliance.

The protection of national interests is carried out only through diplomatic means and constructive democratic engagement, in accordance with international legislation, avoiding deceptive and offensive rhetoric that undermines the democratic coexistence of the Albanian factor in the countries of the region

To achieve this, they develop security policies or national security strategies as strategic documents. In its internal function, the National Security Strategy (SSK) plays a crucial role... it thus constitutes "... a common foundation of language, practices, information exchange, arrangements, and standards... it is a tool for planning and verifying state policies."

The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Albania, approved on February 8, 2024, aims to address the main challenges and threats to national security during the period 2023–2028. The document reflects a significant deterioration of international security and the rules-based international order, which is currently challenged by the aggressive use of military force for territorial conquest and the dismantling of the arms control regime. In addition to geopolitical changes and increased security threats, significant challenges also emerge in the cyber domain, where technology can be used at any time as a weapon against social, economic, and political stability. The first Albanian document of the National Security Strategy (SSK) was approved in 1995. In the following years, it was revised twice more (in 2000 and 2004). Later, the SSK was revised and approved by the Parliament of the Republic of Albania on July 31, 2014.³ The preparation of the SSK-2024 was undoubtedly a positive development

² The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Albania approved by Republic of Albania Assembly with Law no. 14/2024, page 12.

³ National Security Strategy of the Republic of Albania, Official Journal No. 137, Year 2014, pages 6287-6303.

in terms of the country's security, as it filled a conceptual gap for Albania's security institutions after the country had already become a NATO member.

The implementation of the SSK is vital for the country's future and the protection of our national values. Albania's rich and complex history, its geographical position, and its recent past create a dynamic interaction between internal and external threats, as well as the opportunities offered by the strategic environment.

7. Conclusion

The geopolitical and strategic landscape for small countries in the 21st century has grown increasingly complex, especially as the global order has experienced significant shifts in recent years. Over the past five years, several defining themes have emerged that shape the strategic outlook of small nations: the evolving nature of global power dynamics, the expansion of non-state actors, advancements in technology, the intensifying competition between major powers, and the persistent challenges of climate change and resource scarcity.

The security strategies of small countries today are a blend of traditional military methods and innovative approaches. Geopolitical realignments, rapid technological changes, and greater global interdependence have prompted small nations to reassess their defense and foreign policy strategies. In response, many have prioritized bolstering cyber defense capabilities, establishing strategic alliances, and diversifying their economic foundations. Looking ahead, small countries must stay agile, resilient, and adaptive, remaining capable of safeguarding their security and sovereignty amid an ever-evolving and unpredictable global environment.

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