

Small States from a Realist Perspective

Lê Lena*

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Abstract: Realism, a longstanding and highly influential theory in the study of International Relations (IRs) and foreign policy formulation, provides a robust framework for explaining, predicting, and addressing various global issues. Given its significance, examining Realism's perspective on small states has become increasingly essential, especially as these states grow in number and influence within the international system. This research engages with the core tenets of Realist thought to elucidate its views on small states. Key aspects under consideration include the role of these states as IR actors, their power, their structural position within the international system, the impact of an anarchic global environment on them, and the security policies they adopt. Additionally, the analysis explores Realism's theoretical and practical limitations in understanding small states and the influence of international institutions on their behavior. Building on this theoretical foundation, the study provides a critical assessment of how Realism conceptualizes small states while highlighting the shortcomings in explaining their behaviors and agency as distinct actors in global affairs.

Keywords: International Relations theory, realism, small states.

Subject classification: International Relations.

1. Introduction

The 20th century witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of small states, resulting from several significant historical events. The collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy in late 1918 and early 1919 marked a critical turning point, leading to the emergence of new nations in Central and Eastern Europe. Following this, the decolonization process in Asia and Africa during the 1950s and 1960s facilitated the independence of numerous small states, further contributing to their proliferation on the global stage. Moreover, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in the creation of several new republics, many of which qualified as small states due to their limited territorial size, population, and economic capacity.

Nonetheless, despite these advancements, small states remain underrepresented as primary subjects of study within the field of IR (Baldacchino, 2009).

* Vietnam National University, Hanoi.
Email: lelana@vnu.edu.vn

This research gap evidently fails to align with the practical demands imposed by the evolving dynamics and complexities of global politics.

Realism, among existing theories of international relations, stands as the most enduring. Over the centuries, it has undergone substantial development and continues to exert a profound influence on IR scholarship and the formulation of foreign policy. Given its extensive impact, it is imperative to examine the Realist perspective on small states within the context of IR. On the one hand, such an investigation not only enhances theoretical understanding but also bridges theoretical concepts with empirical realities, shedding light on the current international standing of small states. On the other hand, a critical assessment of the contemporary realities faced by small states can inform an evaluation of the strengths and limitations inherent in Realist conceptualizations of these actors.

However, focused academic inquiries on small states from a Realist perspective remain relatively limited. Consequently, understanding Realist views on small states often requires inference from the core principles of Realist theory or from the works of scholars who adhere to this theoretical framework. The main tenets of Realism that will be analyzed to discern its perspective on small states include: the agency of international actors, power dynamics, the international system and structure, the anarchic global environment, security policies, certain limitations faced by small states, and the role of international institutions. This research also highlights both theoretical and practical limitations when applying Realism to the study of IR.

2. Literature review

The rising prominence and influence of small states in the global system have led to an expanding body of research focused on this category of actors. These studies endeavor to define small states through various indicators (Briguglio, 2018; Campbell & Hall, 2009), address the intrinsic vulnerabilities and capacity constraints faced by these states in both domestic governance and international relations (Nilas Tarp & Hansen, 2023; Brady, 2019), and even highlight the resilience, adaptability, and agency of small states, demonstrating their ability to exert influence on the international stage through strategic innovation and purposeful engagement (Thorhallsson, 2018). However, the topic continues to suffer from a lack of conceptual and theoretical coherence. Much of the existing scholarship relies on specific cases or clusters of states to construct behavioral models or infer patterns in foreign policy orientation (Maass, 2017; Jesse & Dreyer, 2016). This fragmented approach underscores a broader limitation within IR theory, particularly within the Realist paradigm.

While works addressing how Realist theory perceives small states remain relatively scarce, several notable studies have contributed to our understanding of this subject. In 2008, Gleason challenged traditional Realist assumptions through a case study of Kyrgyzstan, demonstrating how small states can pursue complex

foreign policies beyond simple alignment with great powers. The study illustrated how Kyrgyzstan maintained simultaneous partnerships with both Russia and the United States, exhibiting a pragmatic approach that transcended conventional Realist expectations of bandwagoning or balancing behaviors (Gleason, Kerimbekova, & Kozhirova, 2008). Gregory Crane's analysis of Plataea provides a compelling historical critique of purely Realist approaches. His work demonstrates how focusing solely on power dynamics fails to capture the complex historical, cultural, and ethical factors that influence small state behavior and their relationships with larger powers. This historical perspective suggests the need for a more comprehensive theoretical framework that can account for factors beyond material power (Crane, 2015). Meanwhile, also adopting the historical approach as the principal framework, Archie W. Simpson's 2018 work on "*Realism, Small States and Neutrality*" marked another significant contribution to the field. Through historical analysis of Austria, Finland, and Sweden during the Cold War, Simpson demonstrated that neutrality represents a viable and enduring strategy for small states rather than merely a temporary condition. This research challenged the Realist assumption that small states must inevitably align with greater powers for survival (Simpson, 2018). More recent scholarship has attempted to bridge theoretical gaps in understanding small state behavior, Zachariades' 2023 doctoral dissertation on Greek and Cypriot foreign policy argues for adapting Neoclassical Realism to better account for small state behavior. By incorporating both systemic and domestic variables within specific geographic contexts, this approach offers a more nuanced understanding of small state foreign policy formulation and implementation (Zachariades, 2023). In particular, Rebecca Pedi and Anders Wivel (2023), in their study titled "*The Power (Politics) of the Weak Revisited: Realism and the Study of Small-State Foreign Policy*," advocate for a shift in small state studies. They argue for moving beyond the traditional emphasis on defining small states, instead focusing on how these states can maximize their influence within the constraints of power asymmetry. The authors propose that small state scholarship could gain valuable insights by incorporating perspectives from realist theory to better understand how such states can strategically utilize their resources and maneuver through the complexities of international politics.

These above studies collectively highlight the limitations of traditional Realist approaches in explaining small state behavior. While they provide valuable empirical evidence for testing the applicability of Realist theory to small states, there remains a critical need for more systematic theoretical analysis. Such work could help develop more comprehensive frameworks for understanding how small states operate within the constraints of the international system while maintaining agency and pursuing their interests effectively. This is the rationale behind this study.

3. Research methods

This research employs established qualitative methodological approaches prevalent in IR studies, with particular emphasis on material and discourse analysis.

The methodological framework is further enhanced through a detailed case study examination of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a regional organisation constituting medium and small powers. During the analysis, a selection criteria was applied for documents based on relevance, reliability, and representativeness while utilizing categorization methods to identify primary themes and discourse. Through this analytical lens, the study seeks to illuminate the theoretical constraints and empirical limitations inherent in the application of Realist paradigms to small state analysis in contemporary international relations.

4. Research results

4.1. Small states from the perspectives of Realism

In conceptualizing small states, Realist scholars emphasize their material capabilities and strategic vulnerabilities rather than adhering to a rigid numerical threshold. A notable exception is David Vital (1967), who, in applying Realist theory to the study of small states, offers a demographic criterion - defining small states as those with populations of 10-15 million in economically advanced nations and 20-30 million in less developed ones. However, common criteria include population size, economic strength, and military capabilities, criteria that bring disadvantages to a state in an anarchic world, having less influence in shaping global outcomes, and frequently relying on alliances and partnerships to navigate the international system.

From this conception of small states, combined with the fundamental principles that form the cornerstone of Realism, several key Realist arguments regarding small states can be identified as follows:

4.1.1. The role of small states in international relations

As previously noted in this study, small states have not been a focal point in Realist theory. Thucydides, often regarded as the father of Realism, asserts that international politics is dominated by strong nations, which “do what they can,” while weaker states “suffer what they must” (Thucydides, 2017: 269). Throughout the centuries of its development, Realism has primarily concentrated on great powers, with minimal attention given to small states.

Even after 1945, when numerous small states gained independence and began to play an increasingly significant role in international relations, Realism maintained this perspective. Kenneth Waltz, the founder of Neorealism, famously argued that: “It would be as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica as it would be to construct an economic theory of oligopolistic competition based on the minor firms in a sector of an economy. The fates of all the states and of all the firms in a system are affected much more by the acts and the interactions of the major ones than of the minor ones....” (Waltz, 1979a: 72). This

persistent and consistent neglect of small states highlights Realism's tendency to undervalue their role and position in international relations.

Moreover, Realism asserts that the nation-state, represented by the state apparatus, is not merely an actor in IR but the fundamental and most significant actor in global politics. This is because the nation-state possesses unique attributes: it is the only entity with a military force, the capacity to govern and mobilize the populace, and the authority to establish regulations governing the behavior of individuals, organizations, and communities. As such, the nation-state has the power to make decisive contributions to issues like conflict and war in international relations (Krasner, 1999). With these capabilities, states can shape and drive the nature and dynamics of international relations. Non-state actors, such as transnational corporations and international organizations, if they exist, are perceived either as tools of the nation-state or as entities that are subordinate to state influence within the international system.

Regarding the notion of actors, Realism generally addresses the state as an actor in broad terms, without excluding small states. This indicates that the theory recognizes the status of small states as actors in international relations, attributing to them the same rational and unitary characteristics as any other state. Realism's emphasis on the centrality of the nation-state in international relations highlights its recognition of the importance of states as actors, including small states, in contrast to non-state actors.

Furthermore, the behavior of small states is analyzed under the assumption that they operate according to the same logic as other states (Classical Realism) or are equally influenced by the structure of the international system (Neorealism). In other words, small states are considered to follow the same behavioral patterns as their larger counterparts, regardless of differences in culture, governance systems, political structures, or leadership (Waltz, 1979b; Walt, 1987; Rosenau, 1966; Jervis, 1978; Schweller, 1992; Handel, 1981).

4.1.2. Small states and power in international relations

Realism's marginalization of small states is fundamentally rooted in its emphasis on power. According to Realist theory, power is both a means and an end for all states in international relations. Power enables states to secure their survival, ensure their development, and maintain their security. Conversely, to sustain and enhance their power, states seek to expand their influence within the international system (Carr, 2016; Waltz, 1979a). Power is derived from a state's superior capabilities or strength relative to others. Given the critical importance of power, Morgenthau observed that states possess an "insatiable lust for power" and a will to dominate (*animus dominandi*) (Morgenthau, 1947: 158-159). This "lust" or "will to dominate" aims to strengthen one's own state while weakening others in relative terms. From this perspective, small states, which inherently have limited capabilities and frequently occupy disadvantaged positions, are perceived as lacking power in international relations.

Realism's portrayal of small states as powerless is further reinforced by the criteria used to define a state's composite national capability. These criteria typically encompass military, economic, and technological prowess. Given this emphasis on fundamental components of power, small states are considered weak because they generally lack sufficient capability across these domains. Even if a small state possesses some of these elements, Realism remains reluctant to classify it as a great power, as international power is only recognized when a state surpasses others in relative terms. Empirical evidence demonstrates that small states often lag significantly behind in military, economic, and technological development.

The characterization of small states as lacking power is deeply embedded in the Realist classification of states, which is grounded in the centrality of power as a defining criterion. Realist scholars typically categorize states into three primary groups based on their relative power. *First, major powers*, or *great powers*, are those with comprehensive components of power - military, economic, and technological - and the ability to exert significant influence on a global scale. *Second, medium/middle powers* possess notable but more limited capabilities, generally exerting influence at the regional level (Hoàng Khắc Nam, 2011). *Third*, the remaining states, which lack substantial international power, are classified as small states. From this power-based perspective, Realism equates small states with weakness due to their limited capabilities.

This perspective is explicitly articulated by Hans J. Morgenthau, a foundational figure in Realist theory. He argued that a great power is defined by its ability to impose its will upon smaller states, while a small state lacks the capacity to assert its will or aspirations over a great power (Morgenthau, 1948).

This conceptualization reinforces the notion that small states are inherently disadvantaged in the international system due to their inability to influence or shape outcomes in the same manner as larger, more powerful actors. In Realism's framework, power is not only the means through which states secure their survival and development but also the ultimate goal of state behavior. Consequently, small states - lacking sufficient military, economic, and technological resources - are viewed as peripheral actors with limited agency in shaping international outcomes. This structural disadvantage places them at the mercy of larger powers within the anarchic international system, where survival often depends on aligning with stronger states or navigating complex security dilemmas.

4.1.3. The position of small states in the international system structure

Since 1979, Kenneth Waltz has introduced the systemic-structural approach and developed Neorealism. By emphasizing the role of power structure, Neorealism is also referred to as *Structural Realism*. This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of power structures in shaping international relations and has since become a dominant perspective in the field. According to Waltz, the structure of the international system is primarily determined by the distribution of power among states (Waltz, 1979). This distribution is influenced by states with significant

international power and their relative strength vis-à-vis one another. As a result, the structure of the international system is predominantly shaped and governed by major powers that possess a comparative advantage in terms of capabilities. This advantage allows great powers to establish the rules of engagement, maintain patterns of relationships, and promote trends that align with their interests within the global arena. The greater a state's power and its relative advantage over others, the higher its position within this system. Thus, major powers hold an enhanced capacity to influence and shape the structure of international relations. Conversely, small states, with their limited capabilities, are often perceived as peripheral actors within this structure, lacking the ability to significantly affect or reshape the international system.

Within the structural framework of Neorealism, middle powers may lack the capacity to shape the international system but can still exert a degree of influence over it. In contrast, due to their limited capabilities, small states do not occupy a significant position within the power structure of the international system. Based on this premise, Hänggi and Régnier (2000) argue that the criteria for determining whether a country qualifies as a small state are contingent upon its ability to project influence within the global system. Accordingly, small states are characterized by their lack of influence in the international structure, as they do not possess the capacity to create rules of engagement or establish prevailing patterns of relationships. These states are essentially passive actors, subject to the dynamics imposed by larger powers within the international power structure. The limited capabilities of small states dictate their low (or nonexistent) status within this structure, which further constrains their role within the broader international system. As Glacienne Krimpekva contends, small states wield limited influence in global affairs due to their constrained capacities, which consistently positions them at the bottom of any ranking or classification of state hierarchies (Galal, 2020). This marginalization underscores Neorealism's view that small states are inherently disadvantaged in an anarchic international system dominated by larger powers, where influence and agency are primarily reserved for those with superior capabilities.

4.1.4. Small states in the anarchy

From a Realist perspective, the international system is fundamentally characterized by anarchy. Unlike states within a domestic context, which have established mechanisms to formulate policies and laws to maintain stability, the international system lacks such institutional frameworks. States exist and interact without any overarching supranational authority or global government. This anarchic condition stems from the inherent desire of states to safeguard their national sovereignty. As long as states prioritize their sovereignty, the absence of a supranational entity will perpetuate this state of anarchy.

Thomas Hobbes, one of the classical authors of Realism, argues that individuals living in an anarchic environment, i.e., in the condition of a state of

nature, experience widespread competition and conflict within society. Similarly, Morgenthau asserts that the inherently contradictory nature of human beings inevitably results in conflicts between states within such an anarchic environment (Morgenthau, 1948: 27). Echoing this view, Mearsheimer (1995) describes the anarchic nature of the global system as one where brutal conflicts occur, with states constantly seeking opportunities to gain superiority over one another.

According to Realism, the inherent nature of states is characterized by self-interest and the pursuit of national gain, which leads them to prioritize their own national interests above all else. In such a context, states do not rely on external assistance; rather, they adopt a *self-help* approach to ensure their security and survival. Living in an anarchic international environment rife with conflict and competition, states view national security interests as paramount to safeguarding their existence.

However, this presents significant challenges for small states, as they are often unable to compete militarily against larger nations. As Michael I. Handel (1981) notes in his book *"The Small States in International Politics and Organizations"*, a small state "is a state which is unable to contend in a war with the great powers on anything like equal terms" (Handel, 1981: 36). Due to their limited capacities and unfavorable power dynamics, small states frequently lack the ability to defend themselves against the existential threats posed by larger states and are incapable of imposing their will on other actors. Consequently, unlike larger states, small states are perpetually anxious about their security and are preoccupied with ensuring their national survival in the face of coercive or violent actions by more powerful states (Fox, 1959; Krause & Singer, 2001). Thus, the anarchic nature of the international environment, combined with their limited capabilities, exacerbates security issues for small states, making them more acute and frequent. As a result, these states often prioritize security concerns over developmental issues and external relations over domestic matters.

4.1.5. Security policies of small states

From a Realist perspective, in light of the aforementioned security challenges, small states often tend to depend on larger nations to maintain their existence. Rothstein (1968) asserts that "the state that cannot obtain security by its own capabilities and relies on others primarily to protect its security in the event of any external threats. Therefore, it seeks to hold bilateral agreements with the stronger countries with the aim of ensuring its protection and independence" (Rothstein, 1968: 29). This reliance on external sources for security and survival stems from their limited resources, which impede their ability to protect themselves against the security threats posed by larger states.

Many Realist scholars suggest that small states typically have three strategic options when they feel threatened: (1) *Balancing*, which involves forming alliances with other threatened states, including larger powers. This approach serves as the quickest means of enhancing strength by leveraging external resources to

counterbalance the threatening larger state; (2) *Bandwagoning*, which entails aligning with the threatening state itself. This strategy is believed to mitigate the threat and potentially yield certain benefits in relations with that great power rather than adopting an adversarial stance; and (3) *Neutrality*, which seeks to avoid participation in conflicts. In certain instances, neutrality may be implemented through a hedging strategy, which allows small states to protect their interests while remaining non-aligned. These strategies are further illustrated through ASEAN's approach to maintaining neutrality amid regional competition, as analyzed in the following sections of this article.

4.1.6. *Security dependence of small states*

In examining these strategic choices, Realist scholars employ concepts such as “hegemonic stability” or the “orbit of great powers” to explain the decisions made by small states. According to this view, small states are more likely to have security dependencies on larger states rather than on fellow small states. Michael I. Handel (1981) argues that when weak states choose to align with one another, their defense costs increase, while the effectiveness and trust in their security diminishes. He even highlighted that “The larger the number of weak states in an alliance, the more difficult it becomes to coordinate military and political actions.... In the political sphere, varying hierarchies of interest, conflicting priorities, and competition for leadership and influence within the alliance make it very hard to maintain united and coordinated action for any prolonged period” (Handel, 1981: 154).

Forming alliances and aligning with major powers not only helps small states protect their sovereignty and populations from threats and potential military aggression but also facilitates trade activities with members of the alliance, especially with the leading power (Gowa & Mansfield, 1993). In exchange, small states often grant larger states certain privileges, such as preferential access to resources or influence over their foreign policies. For great powers, alliances with small states are not motivated solely by survival needs but by the desire to expand military reach, exert foreign policy influence, or prevent the emergence and dominance of rival powers (Rothstein, 1968).

The ability of a small state to maintain neutrality is not fully determined by its own will but is often subject to the preferences of more powerful states. This challenge becomes even more pronounced in the context of conflicts among major powers, as these dominant states may seek to either coerce or prevent smaller states from aligning with the opposing side (Crawley, 2006: 338). Thucydides’ the *Melian Dialogue* in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* - a foundational text for Realist theory - illustrates this dynamic. In this historical episode, Melos, an island in the southeastern Aegean Sea, tried to preserve its neutral stance during the conflict between Athens and Sparta. However, due to its strategic location, Athens deemed Melos’s potential allegiance to Sparta as a significant threat. Consequently, Athens dispatched envoys to negotiate with the Melians, resulting in the infamous assertion, “the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.” This

dialogue encapsulates the Realist perspective on the constraints faced by small states regarding neutrality (Crawley, 2006: 338).

From the Realist viewpoint, the neutrality of a small state is contingent on the acquiescence of great powers. In scenarios of heightened conflict - especially those involving rival major powers - attempts by small states to remain uninvolved may be perceived as a latent threat by any engaged great power. Thus, while Realism does not entirely dismiss the possibility of neutrality for small states, it emphasizes that such a choice is dependent on the will of stronger actors. Small states, therefore, lack autonomy to unilaterally maintain their neutrality.

4.1.7. Additional limitations of small states in international relations

Rothstein (1968) articulates a crucial aspect of understanding the behavior of small states: “The challenge of comprehending small state behavior extends beyond recognizing their weaknesses. These states, given their inferior power status - a condition they perceive as permanent - therefore exhibit consistent behavioral patterns in response to various situations” (Rothstein, 1968: 23).

Because of their constrained capabilities, the foreign policies of small states are often oriented toward adjusting to existing realities rather than attempting to reshape the world order in their favor. Vital (1967) characterized the survival of small states as being more a matter of “bending like a reed in the wind than to stand like a rock in a waterfall” (Knudsen, 2002: 189). This implies that such states adapt their behavior to the dynamics of the international system rather than pursuing grand strategies to alter it. According to Neorealism, as soon as there is a structural shift in the international system (whether through emerging threats or changes in power distribution) small states modify their foreign policy behavior to adapt to these new conditions.

Realist scholars have also highlighted several limitations that small states face in international affairs. In terms of interests, Annette Baker Fox (1959) notes that small states' concerns are predominantly regional. Regarding objectives, Raimo Väyrynen (1997) describes small states as having narrow goals within their operational scope. In terms of behavior, Evans and Newnham (1998) assert that “small states are limited actors in international activities, favoring global intergovernmental organizations, endorsing international law, restricting the use of military force, and generally prioritizing diplomacy at a regional level” (Evans & Newnham, 1998: 500-501). Henderson (1980) provides a more detailed account of small states' constraints: (1) limited engagement in international issues due to insufficient resources; (2) foreign policy interests and the institutional apparatus to implement these policies are restricted, preventing significant roles in global affairs; (3) foreign policies that mainly focus on economic and trade development; (4) a strong reliance on multilateral mechanisms, international organizations, treaties, and alliances for safeguarding national interests; (5) emphasis on moral or ethical principles, despite lacking the power to promote these values extensively; and (6) a tendency to avoid or fear great powers, though occasionally exhibiting risky behavior.

These limitations are deeply rooted in Realist conceptions of power. The limited capacities of small states inherently restrict their options in international relations, particularly in their dealings with great powers and in addressing global issues.

4.1.8. Small states and international institutions

Numerous studies, especially from the Liberal perspective, emphasize the significance of international institutions for small states, highlighting their positive impacts on security and development. Liberal scholars argue that these institutions provide small states with frameworks that promote cooperation, mitigate power imbalances, and contribute to global governance, thus enhancing the security and economic well-being of smaller nations.

However, Realist scholars offer a more skeptical view, acknowledging only limited benefits of international institutions for small states. From a Realist standpoint, small states primarily engage with international organizations to gain additional advantages, amplify their voice, access resources, and foster perceptions that might support their survival in an international order dominated by great powers. Nevertheless, these benefits are most evident in areas of “low politics” such as education, healthcare, and cultural cooperation - domains that do not directly challenge issues of power, security, or state sovereignty (Thorhallsson, 2018; Stănescu, 2024).

In the realm of “high politics”, involving security and military matters, Realism contends that international institutions do not effectively ensure the safety of small states or protect them from coercion by larger powers. This perspective is rooted in the Realist belief that international institutions are temporary constructs, existing mainly to serve the interests of powerful states. These institutions are often established and directed by the most dominant powers, and the participation of small states within these frameworks remains subject to the influence and expectations of these great powers. Small states only benefit when their interests align with those of leading nations. Despite these prevailing assumptions, international institutions can play a significant role in advancing the interests of small states even in the realm of “high politics”. Through multilateral frameworks, small states can enhance their diplomatic influence and representation (e.g., within the United Nations), strengthen security through collective defense mechanisms (as seen in ASEAN and the Economic Community of West African States - ECOWAS), and secure economic support and development assistance (via institutions such as the IMF and World Bank). Moreover, participation in these institutions enables small states to engage in norm-setting and legal negotiations that shape international rules in their favor. The case of ASEAN, discussed below, provides a compelling illustration of these dynamics.

This Realist viewpoint is particularly evident in analyses of the strategic dilemmas faced by small states amid United States-China or China-Japan rivalries within cooperative frameworks in East Asia. Institutions composed solely of small states are often deemed ineffective in ensuring security or resolving regional

conflicts. These mechanisms are said to struggle in addressing disputes and become increasingly irrelevant as great power competition intensifies. In some cases, such institutions may even become arenas for great power rivalry or evolve into platforms dominated by coalitions of major states.

In contrast to Liberalism and, to some extent, Constructivism, which view institutions as crucial tools for small states to secure autonomy and reinforce their position vis-à-vis great powers, Realism maintains that in the sphere of “high politics,” international institutions offer unreliable assurances. As John Mearsheimer famously argues, these institutions often present “false promises” (Mearsheimer, 1995).

4.2. Evaluating the limitations of Realism in analyzing small states

4.2.1. Theoretical limitations of realist approaches to small states

Overall, Realism does not hold in high regard the role of small states in international politics, which has led to limited attention being paid to this subject within the theory. Nonetheless, Realism does offer several noteworthy points regarding small states. According to this theory, small states possess the fundamental characteristics of any state and are considered legitimate actors in international relations. Like all other nations, small states are rational actors striving for self-preservation in an anarchic environment, continuously seeking to enhance their power - their actions driven by national interests.

However, through the lens of power dynamics, Realism characterizes small states as weak entities. They often lack the essential components that constitute national power, and when such components are present, they tend to be at a disadvantage compared to larger states. This situation of limited national capacity prevents small states from wielding significant power in international relations and from achieving a notable position within the international system.

Moreover, living in a competitive and conflict-ridden anarchic international environment, their relative power weakness subjects small states to constant security threats, challenging their sovereignty and survival. As a result, security emerges as a persistent concern and a primary focus in the foreign policies of small states, particularly in their interactions with great powers. The constraints of limited capabilities and security threats impose significant limitations on small states in terms of their interests, objectives, operational space, and policy choices.

Realist scholars also identify various strategies that small states may adopt in their security policies, such as balancing, bandwagoning, neutrality, hedging, or relying on institutions to ensure their survival. However, they assert that these strategies remain significantly influenced by the will of powerful states. While the survival of small states may be maintained, it often comes at the cost of dependency and compromised interests.

Due to the substantial influence of Realism as a theoretical framework, the points mentioned above continue to resonate in the understanding and practice of IR. Nevertheless, this theory reveals several limitations concerning small states, with at least five notable shortcomings:

(a) *Historical Overreliance*: Although Realism formally emerged as a distinct school of thought in IR between the 1940s and 1950s, its intellectual roots can be traced back to classical political thinkers such as Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from the 5th century BCE to the 18th century. While this historical foundation provides Realism with a robust theoretical framework, it also limits its capacity to adapt to contemporary transformations in global politics, such as globalization, economic integration, climate change, non-traditional security, the rise of social movements and international organizations worldwide, and particularly the growing prominence of small states in the modern era - an international landscape that differs significantly from previous periods.

(b) *Lack of Comprehensiveness*: The limited focus on small states indicates the incompleteness of Realism. Small states constitute a significant portion of global actors across many domains and aspects of international relations. According to statistics, as of 2022 108 countries were members of the United Nations Forum of Small States (FOSS). This means that two-thirds of the world's states are small states (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Singapore, 2022). Realism's neglect of small states leads to a partial, biased, and inadequate interpretation of global dynamics.

(c) *Overlooking Non-Material and Soft Power in Small States*: Realism's predominant focus on material power leads to an undervaluation of the roles and influence of small states in international relations. While Realism acknowledges power dynamics, it overlooks alternative forms of influence that small states can effectively utilize in an increasingly interdependent world. This includes both non-material power (such as diplomatic strategy, institutional engagement, and norm-setting) and soft power, which relies on attraction rather than coercion. By neglecting these dimensions, Realism fails to account for the diverse ways in which small states contribute to and shape international affairs. This gap underscores the need for complementary perspectives, such as Constructivism, that better capture the significance of ideas, identities, and non-material forms of influence.

(d) *Narrow Focus on Security-Political Aspects*: Realism centers on security and political discourse regarding small states. In contrast, contemporary international reality encompasses a wide array of social life sectors, often interlinked. Today, small states engage in these various sectors, impacting their positions in security and politics. This necessitates multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to studying small states rather than relying solely on power dynamics within security-political contexts.

The entirety of the aforementioned limitations of Realism in analyzing the emergence of small states, as well as their behavior and contributions to

international relations, is particularly evident in the case of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The latter's existence and influential role poses significant challenges to Realist conceptions of small states.

4.2.2. ASEAN: A case study of small state agency beyond Realism

Established in 1967, amidst the global tensions of the Cold War, ASEAN emerged as one of the last hopes for building a regional institution in Southeast Asia, following the collapse of the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and MAPHILINDO, a confederation among Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. According to Realist theories emphasizing power, anarchy, institutional roles, and small state policies, the most plausible scenario for ASEAN would have been its dissolution, much like previous mechanisms, or its alignment with a major power in the region. However, in reality, ASEAN has defied these expectations.

Firstly, instead of disbanding, ASEAN expanded its membership from the original five to ten states after the Cold War, and the addition of Timor-Leste in October 2025 will bring the total to eleven. From a loose mechanism meeting once a year in leader summits, ASEAN institutionalized itself, adopting a Charter in 2008, establishing a Secretariat, creating coordinating bodies, setting up headquarters, and organizing a structured meeting schedule. Since 1994, the organization has launched numerous initiatives, establishing mechanisms for cooperation with both regional and extraregional partners, culminating in the official formation of the ASEAN Community in 2015.

Secondly, rather than aligning with a regional major power, ASEAN declared its neutral stance in 1971 through the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) Declaration. Over its 57 years of existence, ASEAN has actively expanded relations with major powers, pursued a policy of multilateralism and diversification, and strategically balanced these relationships. In September 2023, ASEAN conducted its first joint military exercise in the southern part of East Sea, led by Indonesia, without the involvement of Western nations. This move, amid complex and unstable geopolitical circumstances, underscores ASEAN's independence, autonomy, neutrality, and its commitment to maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia.

Thirdly, in terms of influence, Realist theories often view small states as weak and insignificant. Yet, ASEAN has demonstrated that when small states unite, they can exert considerable influence on the political and security landscape of Southeast and even East Asia. The concept of "ASEAN centrality" reflects the association's role in connecting regional and global actors, organizing mechanisms, coordinating policies, and shaping East Asian regionalism through collective influence. ASEAN's partners, including major powers such as the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and India, have all recognized ASEAN's centrality, incorporating this concept into their joint commitments with ASEAN and their

respective regional policies. Joe Biden, the former President of United States emphasized this by stating, “ASEAN centrality is the very heart of my administration's strategy in pursuing the future we all want to see” (Biden, 2022).

Fourthly, concerning power, Realism emphasizes material power as the primary tool and objective for the survival and development of international actors. ASEAN, however, exemplifies the significance of non-material power, specifically normative power, in international relations. Through the “ASEAN Way,” exemplified by the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) and its mechanisms, ASEAN has established norms that guide the behavior of regional and external states wishing to engage with the region. Norms such as non-interference, peaceful conflict resolution, consensus-building, dialogue, and consultation bear ASEAN's imprint. The fact that major powers like the United States, China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and Australia have signed the TAC to join the East Asia Summit affirms ASEAN's tangible role. It also illustrates how small states can influence the behavior of great powers and establish rules of engagement through normative power.

Furthermore, Realist scholars often underestimate the role of soft power in international relations. Their pessimistic perspective does not recognize the importance of building trust, confidence, and habits of cooperation as a means to ensure regional peace. Yet, through various omni-enmeshment models that increase interdependence, interaction, and mutual understanding, and through the use of soft power in its problem-solving approaches, since 1967 ASEAN has contributed to the absence of major conflicts in Southeast Asia. This regional stability challenges the Realist notion that only hard power can create order and stability.

Fifthly, Realism generally dismisses the significance of institutions, viewing them as instruments of major powers used to maximize their interests in international relations. Nonetheless, ASEAN has developed a series of multilateral, ASEAN-centric institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (1994), ASEAN Plus Three (1997), the East Asia Summit (2005), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) (2010). These mechanisms have attracted participation from both regional and global actors, thereby challenging Realist assumptions. From regionalism led by small states to the establishment of mechanisms addressing shared concerns, ASEAN presents an anomaly for Realist expectations. ADMM+, for instance, created a new norm where defense ministers meet not on the battlefield but to discuss solutions for regional peace and stability.

In recent years, ASEAN has gained recognition as a strategically vital region in the global economy. The bloc's GDP reached USD\$3.8 trillion in 2023, ranking fifth worldwide, and is projected to become the fourth-largest economy by 2030. Despite global economic challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN attracted USD\$229 billion in FDI in 2023, affirming its status as an economic growth and investment bright spot (ASEAN Secretariat, 2024; World Bank, 2024). Realist scholars, when focusing solely on ASEAN's geopolitical lens, may overlook the organization's economic strength and its use of economic influence as a form of soft power to promote regional cooperation and maintain its position on regional and global issues.

However, this analysis does not entirely refute the applicability of Realism in explaining ASEAN's behavior and policies. ASEAN's limitations in addressing crises, such as the coup d'état in Myanmar or tensions in the East Sea, and the centrifugal tendencies of member states amid United States-China rivalry, are often examined through a Realist lens. Nevertheless, ASEAN remains a compelling example of how small states possess a wider range of behavioral options and exert greater influence in international relations than Realist theories typically predict.

5. Conclusion

Realism offers a distinct approach to understanding the behavior, policies, and roles of small states in IR, albeit with significant limitations. While Realism acknowledges the existence of small states as actors within the international system, its emphasis on power and structural dynamics leads to an underappreciation of their influence. According to Realist thought, small states, lacking sufficient military, economic, and technological resources, are considered weak and thus have minimal impact on international affairs. In an anarchic environment dominated by power politics, small states are perceived as occupying the lowest ranks or even lacking a position altogether, often viewed as dependent on major powers for survival and preoccupied with security concerns over developmental aspirations.

Furthermore, Realism's state-centric focus underestimates the importance and development of institutions at both regional and global levels. By concentrating on the politics of the past and prioritizing hard power rooted in material capabilities, Realism fails to provide a comprehensive understanding of contemporary IR. It cannot account for the increasing number and influence of small states or suggest effective policies for these nations amidst intensifying great power competition. Consequently, alternative theories like Liberalism and especially Constructivism have emerged as either complementary frameworks or, in some cases, replacements that more fully capture the complexity and significance of small states in today's global landscape.

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