

The first comprehensive work on small states in international relations was published in 1959, emphasizing the limited capacity of small and weak military states to resist the pressure of the great powers. Scholars have since debated what a small state is or does and what sets apart small states from bigger states or great powers. Variables such as population size, limited diplomatic resources, vulnerability and a lack of military capacity, size of economy (GDP) and territory, power, perception and image are used to formulate the definition of a small state and to describe its functions, “modern” definitions portray small states as global actors with an international voice, focusing on how a small state can influence international organizations. With these variables and methods, as of today, thirty-four states can be defined as small in Europe, for example, Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, Austria, the Netherlands, Latvia, Slovakia and Iceland. The problem with modern small state studies is that they overlook how important the concept of security is for small states and their policy. International security and strategy are central for small state studies because the principles of security include equal rights for all nations, safeguards in the military, political, economic, health and humanitarian areas, respect for sovereign rights and a just political settlement of international crises and regional conflicts. If these principles are universal, small states can develop a strategy in cooperation with other states. Here it is argued that the “old” methods of defining small states are neither obsolete nor outdated. For small states, the importance of being small depends not only on the notion of size but also on the asymmetrical relationship with the powerful states. In this paper, the focus is on international security and strategy, the concept of smallness, power relation and binary oppositions in small state studies using Iceland as an example, in the period from 1945 to 2007. The hypothesis is that a small state responds to change in the international system to achieve security. This paper recognizes the limited capability of small states and the power asymmetry of international relations. I argue that binary oppositions and the inherent vulnerability in small state studies explain the security policy and strategy of a small state.

## **Small states**

In the Cold War quantitative definitions of small states were first used to study “smallness”

in the international system, the variables used were military strength, population size, the geographic mass of countries and the gross domestic product (GDP). A more qualitative approach studied small states from the role and influence small states have or don't have in the international system: their relations with greater powers, in military alliances and within world politics, forced to make decisions based on information supplied by bigger states (Baker Fox 1959; Vital 1966, 1971; Rothstein 1968; Keohane 1969; Handel 1981). In the post-Cold War era, the research has focused on international organisations and the influence "small states" could exercise in cooperation with other states and international organisations and how the political elite in a small state used to define their state. A psychological definition assumes that states define themselves as they see themselves. If a state perceives itself to be small, so shall it be (Goetschel 1998; Wivel 2005; Mouritzen & Wivel 2005; Rickli 2008; Hey 2003; Frímannsson 2018; Johnston & Ágústsson 2018; Thorhallsson 2006; 2018).

Still, others have researched small states based on the notion of 'niche diplomacy'. This framework demonstrates how small states became smart states, focus on a few foreign policy issues and specialize to become successful internationally (Wivel 2010; Rickli 2008). "This involves focusing on matters that are recognized and viewed in positive light by the international community in order to earn influence" (Baruchello, Kristjánsson, Jóhannsdóttir, & Ingimarsson 2018, p. 2).

Thorhallsson's (2018) important small state and shelter theory in general terms analyzes the identity and the behavior of small states in world politics. The gist of shelter theory is that small states seek economic, political and societal shelter in order to prosper. This means that the small states depend on the shelter provided by larger states, superpowers and international organizations, even on military alliances. This definition is both material and psychological. In this way, a small state is: "not defined by any specific qualities that it possesses (or lacks) but rather by the position it occupies in its own and other's eyes" (Rothstein 1968, p. 127).

One can, therefore, view shelter theory at least implicitly as a realist understanding of the international challenges small states are faced with. However, the assumption that small states must rely on shelter (aid) from other states and organizations follows in the footsteps of the liberal institutionalist assumption embedded in the text and stresses the advantage of

international organizations for small states. Finally does the constructivist focus on identity and norms highlight domestic politics and the preferences of the political elite. Constructivism is, however, not a theory of international relations but a meta-theory concentrating on human society and interestingly, constructivism has little to say about security (Booth 2009).

The focus of this paper is, somewhat, different. It aims at framing international security and strategy in small state studies. It is worth noting that small state studies began in earnest early in the Cold War period. At that time Classical realism (or political realism) was the most “popular” international relations theory. The theory established in the post-World War II era, explains international politics as a result of human nature. Classical realists’ main argument is that order is fragile and created through constant tensions between nation-states. Thus, paraphrasing, state security and interests should have priority for all states. The main signpost of political realism is the concept of interest defined in terms of power (Rösch 2014). It is no coincidence that the first comprehensive small state studies focused on the limited capability and vulnerability of small states and the power asymmetry in international relations. The research used realism to explain the behavior of small states in the international system and created the power relation and binary oppositions in small state studies. However, though binary oppositions are implied in small state studies and used to study international relations, gender, race and in colonial/postcolonial studies, binary oppositions have not been used directly to study small states.

The binary oppositions in small state studies are:

*Big state vs. Small state*

*Security vs. Insecurity (vulnerability)*

*Them vs. Us*

*Power vs. Weakness*

*Inside vs. Outside* (international institutions, international organisations, military alliance's)

These variables (oppositions) explain the status and vulnerability of small states in the international system. The premise is studying small states from the perspective of what small states are not or lack. Therefore, if binary oppositions are used as concepts to study small states a clear picture emerges of the international and security relationship small (weaker) states engage in.

## **Security and Strategy**

This author argues that when studying small states, it is important to research international security and strategy. Security is vital for small states in their relations with “powerful states” as the absence of security means that states must help themselves. I use both broad and narrow definitions of security to examine the behavior (strategy) of small states in international relations. The security definitions are military security, economic security, social security, environmental security and human security. To understand small states and their security policy, it is necessary to research the ‘grand strategy’ during the Cold War (1948-1989) and international security at the end of it (from 1990 to the present).

In this paper, a strategy is defined as a set of consistent actions designed to achieve a specific goal. For small states, the strategy is all about gaining a position and exploiting emerging possibilities to the very best. They acknowledge that there is always an element of uncertainty about the future and that future strategy is about a set of options (strategic choices) that protects national interests as: “[N]ational security always comes first” (Sheehan 2005, p. 11). Of course, this is a realist view of the world, and many would say that this approach is not as important as identity politics and the modern holistic methodology in small state studies. I disagree and argue that, in essence, all small states are predominantly “realist states” because of their smallness, and the binary oppositions in

small state studies.

It can, however, be difficult for small states to choose when and how it is best to protect their own interests as few small states have the political power and resources to predict what might occur in the future (Rothstein 1968, p. 29). There is still truth in what Thucydides [2006] wrote a long time ago: “the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept” (Crane 1998, p. 63; Rostoks 2010, p. 88). Even though Thucydides (c. 460 - c. 400 BC) statement is from the past, history is full of examples that demonstrate the insecurity of small (weaker) states. That small states are influenced by more powerful states and react to change in the international system and accept what they have to accept.

## **Binary oppositions**

In international relations and its subfield of small state studies language is an important factor when creating ideas, discussing certain actors, concepts, events and the preservation of a situation. “According to Jacques Derrida, logocentric thought not only produces binary oppositions, but also sets up a hierarchical relation between the two terms. It assumes the priority of the first term and conceives the second in relation to it, as a complication, a negation, a manifestation, a disruption of the first” (Culler, 1982, p. 93; Calkivik 2017, p. 7). In small states, binary oppositions (for example, big versus small, security versus vulnerability or inside versus outside) are used by both political elites and academics to create a specific meaning out of certain events, and to explain state actions, policy, theory and political thought. In small state studies, the logocentric constructs dualities (big/small, inside/outside) and opposing themes are used in the language to frame an argument.

One of the most important and common binary oppositions in small state studies is to establish different international organizations, groups or states in terms of ‘them’ versus ‘us’. According to it, small states must rely on other states for protection or partnership, participate internationally, join military alliances or international organisations to prosper

(security/shelter). In this author's opinion, this assumption is rooted in realism and historical memory. Titles of books and papers about small states demonstrate this:

*“The survival of small states; Small states in the global system; Small states in Europe; Weak states in the international system; Small states inside and outside the European Union interests and policies; Small states in world politics explaining foreign policy behavior; The National security of small states in a changing world; Small states in international relations: Alliances and small power; The size of states in the European Union theoretical and conceptual perspectives; The inequality of states a study of the small in international relations; Small states in the European Union what do we know and what would we like to know; Small States and Shelter Theory: Iceland's External Affairs; The Tyranny of Doctrine and Modern Strategy: Small (and Large) States in a Double Bind; The Survival Strategies of Small Nations; Small states: Survival and proliferation; Iceland: a Small State Learning the Intelligence Ropes”.*

The underlining meaning of all titles is 'binary' using the comparison between small and big states, them and us, comparing power with weakness, security with vulnerability and inside with outside.

The inherent vulnerability and the binary opposition(s) in small state studies mean that political prudence and the distribution of power [influence] among states within the international system is important for small states and the key to the “determinant of state behaviour” (Waltz 1979). States tend to balance, i.e., strategic balancing is induced by the system. “[E]ach state plots the course it thinks will serve its best interests” (Waltz 1979, p. 113). The perfect example of this strategy is Iceland in the Cold War, it plotted and used its strategic location in the North-Atlantic to secure a national interest, the extension of its fishing zone.

## **Iceland as a case study**

A scholar from a small state is almost always analyzing his state in comparison with bigger states, comparing them and us; this is also the case with this paper. I assume that all states, big or small, strive to influence the international system. The principal argument is that all states are equal at least in theory (Rothstein 1968; Thorhallsson et al 2006). That all states have equal opportunities, but in reality, small states are not as influential on the international scene as some bigger states are. The binary oppositions in the argument above are thus not only *small and big states*, but also *them and us* and *power and weakness*. From the perspective of the state (big or small), power can be measured as influence or control over outcomes, others, events and issues; as a goal for state or leaders; control over resources and capabilities; as the attainment of security or as a reflection of victory in a conflict. Finally power can be measured as status, which some states and actors have, and others do not (Paul 1994, p. 185; see also: Maoz 1989, pp. 239-266; Hart 1976, pp 289-305).

Samuel Huntington (1993; 2002) wrote that power enables states to shape their interests, protect their security and defend against threats. Small states do just that when building alliances and participating in international organisations. For the sake of argument, we can say that Iceland has less power than Denmark that has less power than Germany. Iceland in nearly all terms is the smallest of the three countries and is more likely to compare itself historically, socially, politically and even economically with Denmark than Germany. Denmark, however, would look to Germany for comparison economically, historically and politically. I assume that Germany, historically, first and foremost compares itself with France or the United Kingdom or the other G12 states. Relationship with other like-minded states is always important for a small state, and of course, the two small states, Iceland and Denmark have international security interests that are Nordic and both Trans- Atlantic and European. The case of Iceland demonstrates how important the security relationship with the U.S. was (is) for Iceland's position, status, and strategy in international affairs.

After the end of the Second World War and during the Cold War traditional realism focused on state security as the priority for all states. Security was seen in military terms linked to states and alliances. The definition of security "narrowed down to a largely military focus under the pressure of nuclear arms race" (Buzan 1997, p. 6). The state was the main actor, and the principal aim of a small state was survival in a bipolar world dominated by the two nuclear superpowers. When the two superpowers began to compete on the international scene both militarily and economically in the late 1940s, Iceland had to react to change in

the international system. The majority in the Icelandic parliament had learned the lesson from WWII that Iceland could not defend its territory alone, neutrality was not an option against an aggressor. The role of 'size of state' and debate about hard security, military alliance (power) and protection, security, and vulnerability (binary opposition) in security matters centered on economic security and the decision to join NATO. The Icelandic government believed that the world system in the late 1940s was dangerous for the small state. "Icelanders are a small and unarmed and peaceful nation - the North Atlantic Treaty brings more security" (Bendiktsson 1949, p. 98; 290; 291). The language (logocentrism) they versus us was used to speak against NATO or to rationalize and explain membership to the Icelandic nation in a hierarchical relation (Alþingi 1949).

In the Cold War, Iceland was important for defense and security in the North-Atlantic and used its geographical position to secure national interests. The Icelandic strategy in the Cold War had one specific goal: to establish full control over the fishing zone around the island. The small state was able to exploit the possibilities of the bipolar system of the Cold War period, acting as a 'free rider' state or a 'reluctant ally' yet basing its security policy on military and economic protection from a great power, the United States, 'at little extra cost' to itself. During the Cold War, the strategic location of Iceland in the North-Atlantic helped to develop a special relationship with the US and NATO. This allowed securing Iceland's national economic interests in a series of Icelandic-British conflicts over fishing grounds in Icelandic territorial waters in 1958, 1972 and 1976, also known as the Cod Wars (Ingimundarson 1996, 2001, 2011; Thorhallsson 2018; Kristjánsson 2016; Johannesson 2004). The main security threat in Iceland was unhindered fishing by foreign ships in Icelandic waters. Icelandic politicians willingly risked the relationship with NATO and the United Kingdom to secure its interests. The outcomes of the Cod Wars were vital for Iceland's economic security and a continuation of Iceland's struggle for independence (Grimsson 2020; Johannesson 2008). In hindsight, Iceland was more threatened by Soviet military might in the Cold War than by UK actions. The case of the Cod Wars (in the context of geopolitical tension of the two superstates during the Cold War) demonstrates that small states have influence, even bargain power, if in a political and geographical important location.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of security was broadened out. Problems connected to migration, human rights, ethnic violence, social security, human security, economic and



environmental matters became urgent and a more likely threat to international peace than a potential armed conflict. The concept of security, 'politicized' at that time, started to incorporate more and more issues. The need to distinguish between traditional and non-traditional security gained increased attention (Fierke 2007). At the same time did the strategic importance of Iceland diminish after the breakup of the Soviet Union when the era of free-rider state strategy became obsolete.

For a small state like Iceland, a broader security definition means an opportunity to actively engage in international affairs. Iceland faced considerable outside pressure from the international community to contribute more to international aid, development programs and peacekeeping operations after the Cold War. The pressure came in part from the United States, pointing out that Iceland had to participate as a NATO member state. Icelandic politicians agreed and used this opportunity to continue and strengthen the "good security" relationship with the United States. Thus, Iceland took part in operations in former Yugoslavia to help heal the wounds of the civil wars in Bosnia and Kosovo after the NATO military operation against the Serbs in 1999. The new Icelandic strategy was based on a broad security perspective because international circumstances in the 1990s were fundamental in shaping how states evaluated their security and defense matters. The second reason for a new strategy was that security, politics, and economic affairs linked like never before. Thus, European political and economic policy became more significant for Icelandic security. Iceland joined the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994. Perhaps the biggest step internationally was when Iceland applied for the first time for a seat on the UN Security Council. Politicians in Iceland cited the broadening out of the security concept to justify this new and more active international security policy (Hannibalsson, 1993; Asgrimsson 1999, 2001, 2004; Kristjánsson 2010; Thorhallsson 2012; Ingimundarson 2007).

The strategy in the 1990s and the new millennium was designed to achieve a specific goal, protect Icelandic interests by strengthening economic security ties with the EU, building security cooperation with Europe, and signing the Schengen Agreement. Iceland started to engage more in conventional security matters by partaking in UN peace-keeping missions and NATO operations, for example, in Kabul in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Finally, in 2007 Iceland fully took over responsibility for the defense of its territory. The strategy was about a set of options (strategic choices) to protect national interests and achieve security (including military security) and about Iceland as a more active small state

in the [binary] relations with powerful states (Report on Security and Defence at the Turn of the Century 1999; Asgrimsson 2004; Sverrisdottir 2007).

The Icelandic case (strategy) demonstrates how important security is for the role of small states in the international system. In “modern” small state studies, sometimes, excluding the notion of security, rooted in constructivism, perception and identity politics, small states (defined as they see themselves) deliberately act as “norm entrepreneurs” to gain influence. These factors contradict the traditional IR theories that focus on power, military and economic security but confirm the binary oppositions in small state studies. The assumption is: firstly, international law and sovereign rights have gained more recognition and authority since the establishment of the UNO and this has strengthened the position of small states internationally. Consequently, in the era of globalisation, the great powers are no longer in the position to dictate the rules disregarding the international community. Secondly, international cooperation is more important for small states than powerful states. This discourse is popular in the small Nordic countries (including Iceland) explaining small states outside or inside the EU (binary opposition). The focus is on the power (influence) state exercise that a state can be weak (small) in one relation but at the same time powerful in another. The point is small states outside (them and us) the EU are weaker (power and weakness), but small states inside the EU are more effective and benefit from the economic shelter (security) (Ingebritsen 2002; Thorhallsson 2012, 2008; 2018; Thorhallsson & Wivel 2006; Thüerer 1998; Hey 2003; Rickli 2008; Mouritzen & Wivel 2005).

Even though small state studies treat small and big states as equals in the post-Cold War era, the great powers can choose to change their policy alone or in international organizations, whereas small states have limited influence on the international political environment if the great powers decide to change their policy (Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006; Wiberg 1987; Goetschel 1998). The way small states achieve security has not changed in the new millennium. In exchange for protection, security (shelter), the small state does align itself with the greater power. Both Denmark and Iceland did just that when they joined NATO in the late 1940s. In the new century, both countries supported military action in Afghanistan and Iraq for international security reasons and military protection. For example, Denmark chose to advance its international status and security through active military participation in Afghanistan and Iraq with “high alliance loyalty to the US” (Archer 2014).

Even though Iceland was ready to participate more internationally, in Iceland, the military partnership with the American super-power continued to be central for the small state and the core of the Icelandic security policy (Report on Security and Defence at the Turn of the Century 1999; Policy Statement 2003). This relationship was so important that when the Icelandic government learned that the American fighter jets would leave the Keflavik airbase, the Icelandic government took the step to join the “coalition of the willing” in the war against Iraq in March 2003, hoping to stop the departure of the fighter jets from Iceland. The American government decided to delay its decision after pressure from the Icelandic authorities, who continued to see NATO and the defense agreement between Iceland and the US from 1951 as the central point of Iceland’s security policy (Kristjánsson 2016; Ingimundarson 2007). But in the end, the Icelandic high alliance loyalty to the US did not prevent the departure of the foreign defense force from the island in 2006. The powerful partner in the security relationship did what it had the power to do, whereas, the small (weak) state, Iceland, had to accept the decision made by the greater power.

## **Conclusions**

Small states are studied together with bigger and more powerful states. The term smallness is, however, not easily defined. Quantitative and qualitative approaches in this study demonstrated this. This paper highlights binary oppositions in small state studies and explains how they can be used to understand the security policy and strategy of a small state. The binary oppositions demonstrate that small states, the weaker party in an asymmetric relationship, navigate the international security landscape in partnership with other states, organizations, and institutions. In this author’s opinion, power and influence are two of the four main variables that explain and define a small state. The other two are international security and strategy. This is important because the relationship small states have with powerful states and the international security environment influences the security policy and strategy of a small state. The example of Iceland demonstrates how a small state used its security relationship with the great power United States to form a strategy, protect its interests and limit the consequences of international transformations to achieve security.

The closure of the U.S. military base in Iceland does, however, confirm that the relationship small states have with great powers can be one-sided. The Icelandic example does also show how Iceland reacted to change in the international security landscape after WWII, after the Cold War and in the new millennium to protect its interests and become more active internationally. The gist here is that the binary opposition in small state studies/theory is power-related. In this paper, the main idea is that the security policy and strategy of small states are rooted in the notion of binary opposition in small state studies. In essence, the logocentrism of small state studies identifies their security policy and strategy. The Icelandic example confirms when studying small state(s) one can, methodologically, focus on the concepts of security and strategy, smallness and vulnerability and the binary opposition in small state studies.

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