



# *It's not the size, it's the relationship: from 'small states' to asymmetry*

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*Original Article*

**It's Not the Size, It's the Relationship: From 'Small States' to Asymmetry**

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A half century of debate about the definition of 'small state' has produced more fragmentation than consensus. Though there is impressive and growing empirical and conceptual richness in the field of small-state studies, fundamental definitional ambiguity remains a challenge. In particular, the lack of clarity over how to understand and delimit the central object of study has hindered theory-building, complicated comparison and cumulation, and obfuscated the conversation with International Relations theory more broadly. While these problems have been noted by other scholars of 'small states' (Archer et al., 2014), this article seeks to illuminate the connection between those challenges and the definitional debate. More importantly, it calls for an alternative approach focused on the dynamics of asymmetrical relationships instead of the amorphous category of small (or weak) states, or small (or weak) powers.

This call comes at what seems to be a zenith for 'small states.' Recently, in this journal, Matthias Maass (2014) argued that material and normative shifts in the international system have facilitated a proliferation of small states; others have noted that globalization and decreased external threats allow smaller states to emerge and often thrive (Alesina and Spolaore, 2003). Despite the ongoing disagreement about what a 'small state' is, the study of international society's diminutive members is also enjoying something of a moment, spurred in part by the conversations taking place in this journal. Maass (2009) provided an incisive survey in these pages of the debate over what, exactly, constitutes a small state. After noting distinct approaches, he concluded that

divergent definitions have facilitated empirical richness, which has been reflected in the increasingly agency-focused scholarship of the past two decades. ‘Small states’ have played significant roles through joining international organizations (Goetschel, 1998; Thorhallsson, 2010; Panke, 2011), propagating norms (Ingebritsen, 2002; He, 2016), shaping global climate negotiations (Jaschik, 2014; Deitelhoff and Wallbott, 2012; Benwell, 2011), executing creative diplomacy (Cooper and Shaw, 2009), and influencing alliances (Desch, 1993; Rothstein, 1968; Risse-Kappen, 1995; Morrow, 1991; Keohane, 1971; Shin et al., 2016). Certainly, these states – which by most definitions account for the majority of the world’s states – and their foreign policies merit attention (Kassimeris, 2009: 85). However, work on small states has struggled to identify important commonalities. The list of foreign policy behaviors ascribed to small states is too long to be useful and often contradictory (Hey, 2003a). It seems equally doubtful whether small states share common economic challenges. Despite decades of Commonwealth reports concerned with the unique problems of a class of ‘small states,’ more comprehensive studies have questioned the assumption that small states are more vulnerable than their larger counterparts (Easterly and Kraay, 2000; Alesina and Spolaore, 2003).

Small-state studies’ problems of cumulation and conversation with International Relations theory are in part attributable to the definitional dilemma. There are no clear-cut lines for smallness. As Handel (1981) noted, weakness and strength form ideal-typical endpoints on a multifaceted continuum. This continuum, however, holds little analytical purchase for the examination of one state; it only applies via comparison.

It is time for a change of framework. Analysis of ‘small states’ should pivot from the poorly specified category of smallness to instead prioritize the dynamics of the relationships in which these states are engaged. IR scholars should stop defining and re-defining the concept of ‘small

state,’ and set it aside as an analytical category. What matters is not ‘size,’ however defined, but the relationships between states. Instead of talking about small and large states, it would be more effective to think in terms of asymmetry. This shift, which builds on arguments from Steinmetz and Wivel (2010: 7) to ‘shift the focus from the power that states possess to the power that they exercise’, would move away from the search for behaviors, strengths, or vulnerabilities amongst states as diverse as Switzerland and Mali. A focus on asymmetry facilitates enquiry into how power differentials structure relationships, including through methods of (attempted) control, the interrelation of power and agendas, and how disparities influence the definition of interests on both sides (Womack, 2001; Womack, 2016). We can also examine the limits and possibilities for agency on behalf of the weaker party (Long, 2015). Instead of assuming some overall metric for size as the relevant variable – falling victim in a different way to what Dahl called the ‘lump-of-power fallacy,’ (qtd. in Baldwin, 1980: 497) we can better recognize the multifaceted, variegated nature of power in international politics. Through the lens of asymmetry, a relationship may be overwhelmingly asymmetrical in military terms, but less so economically, diplomatically, or institutionally.

The small-states literature has, of course, explored its subjects’ relationships with great powers; however, it has not placed the dynamics of asymmetrical relationships at the center of its definitions, categories, or analyses. This article advocates a whole-hearted embrace of a relational approach, replacing the analytical category of ‘small state’ with a new perspective and terminology. In the context of asymmetrical relationships, it is less useful to speak in terms of large and small, which have strong, absolutist connotations. While we can talk about the United States and Mexico as having an asymmetrical relationship (Selee and Díaz-Cayeros, 2013), it makes little sense to call Mexico – a country of 113 million people with the world’s eleventh-largest economy

– ‘small.’ As Aspinwall and Reich (2016) demonstrated in these pages, the material power differential does not always produce the expected outcome. Despite that, asymmetry remains an indelible feature of the relationship; one party is preponderant, while the other is comparably deficient in specified, relevant resources. For this reason, it is more consistent to speak in terms of the ‘preponderant power’ and the ‘hypo-power’ in the relationship.<sup>1</sup> A hypo-power is a power ‘in a lower degree,’ to quote the Oxford English Dictionary, without necessarily being subordinated. ‘Hypo’ avoids the connotation of ‘sub-’ that is intentionally evoked in the phrase ‘subaltern realism’ (Ayoob, 2003). While the asymmetrical perspective immediately calls to mind bilateral relationships, there is no reason that studies of asymmetry need to be limited to two states. Similarly to how studies of collective action can be expanded to explore situations with multiple actors, an asymmetry-focused approach can examine the dynamics of power differentials amongst multiple actors. Recent work on diplomatic signaling is illustrative of one approach to this challenge (Trager, 2015). Likewise, the recent *International Politics* special issue on regional contestation to rising powers helpfully illustrated how ‘secondary and tertiary powers’ navigate networks of asymmetrical relationships (Lobell et al., 2015; Flesmes and Lobell, 2015; Flesmes and Wehner, 2015).

The remainder of the article briefly explores the problems of definition and levels of analysis in small-state studies. It then proposes an asymmetrical approach, which offers advantages for comparison, cumulation, and conversation with IR theory, using the debate on hierarchy as an example. Finally, the article describes fundamental questions that an asymmetrical study should include, while acknowledging a number of its shortcomings.

## **Of Size and Power: The problem of Definition**

The problem of definition has been exhaustively noted in the study of small states. This article will not attempt to comprehensively review the definitional debate. This task has been recently and admirably accomplished in these pages by Maass (2009) and Kassimeris (2009: 87-96), and elsewhere by Hey (2003c), Neumann and Gstöhl (2006), and Steinmetz and Wivel (2010). However, a brief summary is necessary to situate this article's argument that the debate is linked to the limited cumulation, comparison, and conversation with IR, and should be set aside.

Describing a half century of definitional debates, Maass (2009) notes that there are, and perhaps should be, multiple conceptions of the 'small state' in IR theory and practice. Small states have long been loosely defined in terms of what they are not, or what they do not possess, instead of what they are. In European diplomacy, the 'small state' emerged as a 'residual category' between middle powers and microstates (Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006). The definitional battle has been central to the study of small states since the late 1960s. Many early definitions set material indicators, such as population or territory. These boasted clarity but suffered from arbitrariness, and they difficult to adjust for differences in level of wealth, state strength, and other factors. This became more noticeable as a new variety of 'small' or 'weak' state emerged from decolonization. Vital (1967) introduced a definition with two population tiers for underdeveloped and developed states, mediated with several caveats that left interpretation up to the researcher. Keohane (1969) rejected this in favor of an approach that stressed a small state's ability to influence the international system. This would later be echoed by four-part divisions used by scholars of middle or rising powers (Mares, 1988). "Scholars create their own definitions and disagree on whether absolute or relative power is the key, the nature of influence on neighbors and/or the system, and many others factors," Lobell et al. (2015) recently noted. Qualitative definitions have focused on

perceptions – of the small state’s leaders, of other states, or of the scholar. In the absence of a common definition, the approach is, to a great extent, ‘I know it when I see it.’

At a systemic level the attempt to create groupings of small, middle, great, and super powers seems intuitively appealing; in practice, the categories have tended to result in grey zones with ‘smallness’ depending on context. Fox’s (1959) pioneering book *The Power of Small States* includes, weakened during World War II from its own civil strife. Explicitly or implicitly, definitions of ‘small states’ have tried to evaluate smallness through system-wide comparison. Handel (1981) eschewed Vital’s attempt at concreteness to instead emphasize a continuum, in which all states possess aspects of strength and weakness. Even without a clear definition, scholars noted the continued emergence of small states, first as a result of decolonization, followed by another wave spurred by the breakup of the Soviet Union and the former Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Maass (2009) described the debate over defining ‘small state’ primarily as a disagreement over criteria, with a tension between quantitative and qualitative approaches. However, the disagreement is deeper than the qualitative-quantitative divide. The problem has been that we are asking the wrong question. Definitional consensus has been elusive because different definitions rely on different concepts of power. More recent literature emphasizes the resilience and agency of small states, leading to a proliferation of qualified types of power seen from the state level. Chong and Maass (2010) advocate evaluating small states in terms of ‘foreign policy power.’ Other descriptions of power are drawn from detailed studies of single countries, though it is not always clear whether the concepts are generalizable. Qatar has ‘subtle power’ according to one author (Kamrava, 2013), and ‘positional power’ according to others (Rubin and Jordan, 2015). Small European states might have greater ‘normative power’ (Ingebritsen, 2002; He, 2016), or be



particularly ‘smart’ and ‘salient’ (Browning, 2006), while Singapore and the Vatican achieve ‘virtual enlargement’ through the deft use of soft power (Chong, 2010). Some small states possess ‘resource power,’ typically based on hydrocarbons (Braveboy-Wagner, 2010; Handel, 1981). One recent attempt to address these diverse approaches to power discusses the bases and means of the particular-intrinsic, derivative, and collective power in which small states may specialize (Long, forthcoming).

The challenge with applying these and other notions of power to small states is that the object of study has already been implicitly defined or selected according to another, less favorable concept of power. Despite myriad definitional attempts, the fundamental concept of ‘small state’ seems to fall back to a material, resource-based concept of power that presents a mirror image of the elements of national power approach prevalent in realism. Small states are defined by their lack of these same capabilities. However, the relevance of specified capabilities is highly contextual (Steinmetz and Wivel, 2010: 6; Kassimeris, 2009: 91). Markers of population, GDP, or military indicators will lose meaning over time or when applied in different geographical contexts. As the focus on agency has grown, scholars have often pivoted to alternate concepts of power to demonstrate small states’ autonomy, influence, or power.

While small-state studies is increasingly rich and diverse, cumulation has been disappointing. Steinmetz and Wivel (2010: 4) noted:

Now, as in the past, the study of small states is plagued by a lack of cumulative insights and coherent debate. There is no agreement on how we should define a small state, what similarities we would expect to find in their foreign policies, or how small states influence international relations.’

The lack of cumulation is directly related to the lack of definition. ‘Indeed, the inherent disagreement and contradiction between weak state scholars suggests that failure to arrive at a

working definition of what constitutes a weak state has stymied development of a theory of weak state foreign policy' (Reeves, 2014: 257). If we are to generalize findings about 'small states,' we must be able to set scope conditions. Simply put, to whom do these findings apply? If they are to apply to other 'small states,' we must be able to identify which states those are. For this reason, perhaps, there has been a richer conversation when the small states involved are limited to those in Europe (Thorhallsson and Wivel, 2006; Wivel, 2005; Steinmetz and Wivel, 2010; Björkdahl, 2008; Goetschel, 1998; Nasra, 2011; Rickli, 2008; Thorhallsson, 2010; Hey, 2003b; Ingebritsen, 2006; Panke, 2011; Panke, 2010). There, the subfield seems to have progressed, while cumulation and comparison regarding the rest of the world's 'small states' has been less notable. Lacking Europe's shared institutional structures, worthwhile, individual studies are rarely in conversation across regions (for an attempt to remedy this, see Archer et al., 2014).

Perhaps more problematically, the subfield's richness has largely produced a one-sided conversation with broader debates in IR. While arguing that small-state studies has much to offer IR theory, Neumann and Gstöhl (2006: 16) noted its 'niche position.' Though she disagreed, Hey (2003a) noted that for many scholars definitional difficulties undermine the usefulness of "smallness" altogether. The lack of conceptual consensus has limited discussion between those who study small states and scholars who question the utility of a subfield that centered on an ill-defined object of study. Small-state scholars have drawn on broader IR theories or criticized their applicability, but the insights from the study of small states do not seem to filter out into a more nuanced discussion of international relations. The definitional debate has been a dead end. Worse, it has turned the study of small states into cul-de-sac infrequently visited by other IR scholars. It is worth considering whether it is time to drop the 'small state' paradigm altogether. But what would replace it?

Moving from size to asymmetry allows a shift in the concept of power that undergirds the approach. Resources (material and ideational) remain relevant. However, they now matter in an explicitly relational sense, prompting analysts to ask not how ‘scarce’ resources spur common behaviors but how power differentials affect the ability to influence or resist influence. Womack (2001: 125) notes, ‘asymmetric relationships are normally characterized not only by a disparity of resources, but also by mutual, if sometimes implicit, acknowledgment of autonomy. They are negotiated relationships, not simply ones of demand and evasion.’ Asymmetry between states in diplomacy bears some similarities to warfare between asymmetrical actors. One side possesses a preponderance of particular, salient resources; however, preponderance hardly guarantees success. Though the preponderant power may initially set the terms of the conflict, the militarily weaker actor can adapt and shift the conflict’s nature. Both studies and recent U.S. experiences highlight the difficulty in converting resources into outcomes (Maoz, 1989). The preponderant power’s ‘victory’ depends heavily on its objectives, the resolve of both parties, the context, and the strategies employed. Interestingly, in asymmetrical conflicts, it is not the disparity of material resources that determines the outcome. In fact, some scholars have suggested that preponderance itself produces some of the problems that lead to failure (Sullivan, 2007).

Clearly, this analogy does not translate perfectly to interstate bargaining and diplomacy. However, if preponderance does not guarantee victory in matters of war, where state interests are supposedly most closely held, surely it does not guarantee victory elsewhere. Much work in small-state studies has emphasized this point. Situating these studies within asymmetrical relationships will make this clear, while also helping to avoid overstating the influence of small states. For example, material asymmetries may be partially offset in disparities in attention, political will, and perceptions, with real effects for both agendas and outcomes (Womack, 2016; Shin et al., 2016;

Darnton, 2012). This is the essence of Keohane's admonition, oft-cited by small-state scholars, but seemingly ignored elsewhere, that 'If Lilliputians can tie up Gulliver, or make him do their fighting for them, they must be studied as carefully as the giant' (1969: 310). While this rejoinder highlights the importance of dyadic asymmetry, Keohane's own approach to defining small states was among the most explicitly systemic. (Two years later, Keohane (1971) was more bilateral in focus.)

### **Let's Take This to a New Level**

Along with the definitional debate, another small-state bugbear has involved levels of analysis. Properly asked, this should be a question about which level is best suited to analyze small states – a perspective Chong and Maass (2010) attempt to shift via 'foreign policy power.' In other works, levels of analysis have been reified, with analysts asking which level has the greatest impact on small states.<sup>2</sup> This approach, too, asks the wrong question, because it treats a level of analysis as something real that affects policy decisions. Each level of analysis can be useful for examining particular cases – more in terms of specific decisions than countries' overall situations, as the levels approach has sometimes been applied. On their own, levels do not tell much that seems unique about 'small states' as a category, nor have they led to much theory building. It might be possible to group independent variables by corresponding level, but the resulting categories would likely combine factors that held little in common.

Particularly during the Cold War, numerous scholars emphasized the international systemic level as dominating small-state behaviors (El-Anis, 2015: 3-7). Systemic factors have been used to highlight the constraints that small states face due to their need to focus on security. The arguments about small states' security resemble those made by neorealists: the international structure forces all states to prioritize security and survival. Rothstein (1968) and Handel (1981)

analyzed how different international systems have been more or less hospitable for small-state survival. It is plausible that a multipolar system would offer small states the ability to maneuver between alliances, or that a unipolar system might be more secure. However, it does not seem that a systemic analysis, understood through Waltzian notions of systems defined by their polarity, tells us a great deal about when small states will survive or wither, as Maass (2014) argued. In practice, the greatest threats to small states have little to do with great powers. Instead, most small state ‘deaths’ were the result of processes of integration of non-great powers; these have been rare for the past hundred years. Though territorial threats are less common, power asymmetries remains fundamental.

Economic analyses have also adopted systemic approaches to examine small states’ prospects in a globalizing world. Reflecting the heritage of dependency and world systems theories, there has often been an emphasis on ‘vulnerability’ to market forces beyond the small state’s control (Briguglio et al., 2008). The emphasis, frequently restated in Commonwealth Secretariat reports, seems to have outlived its supporting evidence (Secretariat, 1985). Katzenstein’s (1985) study of small, corporatist states in Europe provided plenty of room for doubt; the economic progress of those same states in the three decades since his book’s publication offers more. So, too, do economic analyses, the spread of strong, wealthy, and relatively small (in population and territory) states in Asia. With increasing options for regional integration and global trade, the handicaps of smallness might be diminishing (Ólafsson, 1998). States small in territory and population but large in hydrocarbon and mineral deposits offer a different class of examples that question whether small states are necessarily buffeted by the winds of the global economy to a greater extent than their larger counterparts.

Chong and Maass (2010) argue that at the state level of analysis, the limits and possibilities of small states come into focus. This level has been approached differently than in foreign policy analyses of larger states, where bureaucratic politics have had more sway (Allison, 1971). With their smaller bureaucracies, small states are often presumed to be more cohesive units – ironically, closer to a rational, unitary actor than the great powers on which realism has primarily focused. The state level has produced some promising findings. The most interesting have related to small states' foreign policy strategies – hiding, binding, and 'virtual enlargement' among others (Wivel, 2010; Chong, 2010). However, these strategies are overwhelmingly related to how small states manage multiple asymmetrical relationships. A relational approach can avoid arbitrary divisions based on population or other measures and emphasizes commonalities based on a state being considerably the smaller/weaker in a dyadic relationship (Baldacchino, 2009).

The individual level of analysis is perhaps the most idiosyncratic, in small states or otherwise. Hey (2003c) asks whether the individual is more important in the foreign policy of small states than larger ones, given the lower levels of bureaucratization. In the study of Latin American foreign policy, for example, various authors have emphasized the outsized importance of presidentialism in foreign policy, as a result of size, institutional underdevelopment, or a political culture that emphasizes caudillos (Hey, 1997; Giacalone, 2012; Mora and Hey, 2003; Russell and Tokatlian, 2009; Cason and Power, 2009). However, it hardly seems clear that individual leaders are more dominant in small Latin American states than Vladimir Putin is in Russian foreign policy. Cognitive FPA has advanced the understanding of how leaders are influenced by biases, group dynamics, cognitive shortcuts, and risk aversion, but none of these would seem to be unique to small-state leaders. There could be patterns – perhaps leaders of small states tend to be more or less risk averse – but to date they have not been identified.

The argument here is not only about abandoning the definitional debate, but about situating those states formerly known as small within a different level of analysis – starting with the dyad. The dyadic level of analysis emphasizes the pairing of relevant actors, which are likely, but not necessarily, states. As bodies of research on the democratic peace and patterns of militarized conflict have demonstrated, the dyadic level can allow scholars to meaningfully cumulate very different states to find patterns amongst their relationships (Kinsella and Russett, 2002). In this case, the relationship of interest is not between a ‘small state,’ however defined, and every other state in the world. Rather it is between a state that possesses dramatically fewer elements of national power than the other state in the pairing – a hypo-power and a preponderant power. The relationship is asymmetrical, though this does not presume domination or unidirectional influence.

The dyadic level of analysis allows for a more multifaceted treatment of power than lump categories of small, medium, and large. One might synthesize various aspects of power into an index, but the result would be one-dimensional. This index would struggle to capture a situation in which state A has a larger military than state B, while state B possesses a more developed economy and stronger alliance ties. It is not clear which state is ‘larger;’ more importantly it is not clear which state is better suited to exercise relational power. This will depend on the context and the objectives sought. More concretely, Bangladesh has a population fifteen times larger than Sweden, but if the relevant aspect of the relationship concerns garment production, population may not be an advantage over the Scandinavian home of global retailers like H&M.

Though the dyadic level refers to pairs, its logic is not limited to examining two states at a time. A state’s connections with allies are likely to be an important aspect of its relational power – the ability to both change the behaviors of other actors and to resist changes in its own behavior when under pressure from others. We can examine asymmetries among combinations of states,

moving from dyads to triads and beyond. For example, Cooley's recent studies of Central Asia have emphasized how these leaders use multiple asymmetrical relationships for state, regime, and personal advantage (Cooley, 2014; see also Strakes, 2013). We can reasonably apply a dyadic focus beyond state-to-state relations, too. For example, we can examine aspects of asymmetry between a small state and the International Monetary Fund. Asymmetries could range from dollar reserves to bureaucratic economic expertise.

Though asymmetry has not been utilized widely as an organizing principle, studies of 'small states' have included relational aspects, focused especially on alliance behavior and autonomy. Many studies of alliance behavior initially argued that small states should bandwagon with a rising, larger power, given that their contribution to the balance of power would be inconsequential. That picture has grown increasingly complicated, with scholars showing how small states engage in a variety of behaviors, such as binding, 'leash-slipping,' 'entangling diplomacy' (Lobell et al., 2015; Flesmes and Wehner, 2015), or 'soft balancing' (Friedman and Long, 2015; Whitaker, 2010). Starting with Fox (1959), there has been considerable attention to whether small states can retain a degree of autonomy from the pressures of great powers. Just as much of IR theory has assumed power as the overriding goal of great powers, scholars have assumed autonomy to be the overriding goal of small states in asymmetrical relationships. Steinmetz and Wivel consider autonomy and influence to be oppositional for small states in asymmetrical relationships, but the dichotomy is not inevitable. Reviewing the treatment of the Global South, Braveboy-Wagner and Snarr (2003) note that early attempts to demonstrate that core powers determined the foreign policies of 'dependent' states – either through compliance, consensus, or cooptation of dependent-country elites – provided weak evidence. The literature indicates that 'regimes of dependent states have significant latitude in their foreign policy,' and



that many might adopt ‘counterdependent’ strategies for reasons of ideology or domestic politics (Braveboy-Wagner and Snarr, 2003). Studies of Latin American IR, comprised of hypo-powers in proximity to a preponderant power, have described autonomy as a central foreign policy goal (Russell and Tokatlian, 2003; Burges, 2009; Vigevani and Cepaluni, 2007). Instead of giving implicit normative value to autonomy, framing the study of small states’ foreign policy in terms of influence under asymmetry allows us to consider that, as Carlos Escudé (1997) advocated, small states’ leaders might more effectively achieve their goals through either confrontation or some degree of cooperation. Baltic states must manage their relations with Russia on the one hand and the NATO powers on the other – balancing one by binding with the other (Hamilton, 2008; Crandall, 2014). In other words, it is the management of multiple asymmetrical relationships.

Despite the frequent implicit focus, the concept of ‘asymmetry’ and its implications has not been central to IR, with the significant exception of work by Womack. However, a particular mutation of asymmetry has garnered significant recent attention – hierarchy. The paradigmatic example of this has been the work of David Lake (Lake, 1996; Lake, 2009; Donnelly, 2006), complemented by cogent research on military basing (Cooley and Nexon, 2013; Bitar, 2015). Lake (2009: 179-180) notes that his theory of hierarchy is dyadic, and much of his discussion of hierarchy concerns the relationships between superpowers and those that might be labeled ‘small.’ Hierarchy in Lake’s terms requires an acceptance of the legitimacy of the commands of the dominant state, but it is practically based on power asymmetries that allow the dominant state to threaten coercion or grant and withdraw benefits to ‘subordinate’ states. Asymmetry is not sufficient for the creation of a hierarchical relationship, but it would seem to be necessary. Hierarchy, in the conception of Lake and others who have complemented his work (Butt, 2013; Clark, 2009), is a type of social contract between states. There is a ‘conferral of rights by the ruled’

(Lake, 2009: 8). In international hierarchy, subordinated states exchange aspects of their sovereignty for benefits, most often security.

There are two reasons why discussing asymmetry is more broadly useful than limiting ourselves to hierarchy. The first reason rests in the lack of sufficiency between the two concepts. The observance of asymmetry of material capabilities does not allow the analyst to imply the existence of a hierarchical relationship. Though Lake tries to impute this through various proxies, a relationship is only truly hierarchical if legitimacy can be established – that the weaker state has conferred rights to the preponderant power. Empirically, this is a tall order, particularly given that, as Lake notes, the boundaries and dynamics of hierarchical relations are often contested and in flux. The second reason is the study of hierarchy has tended to negate the agency of the weaker party (Long, 2015: 13-18).

An asymmetrical approach leads the analyst to different questions and allows for categorizing relationships based on what contextually matters instead of sorting states by measures of ‘size’ of inconsistent importance. A preponderant power’s tremendous military may not always be helpful for understanding the nature of a relationship. For the United States and Canada, this feature of asymmetry is less relevant than it is for the asymmetrical relationship between China and Taiwan. We may advance different hypotheses about relations of military asymmetry than those of asymmetrical interdependence. This has often occurred implicitly within the robust subfield on small states in Europe, where numerous authors have argued that the absence of existential or territorial threats allows qualitatively different foreign policies and levels of influence (Grøn and Wivel, 2011; Thorhallsson, 2010). The European Union is treated as a case apart, emphasizing ‘the main opportunities offered by the European integration process’ (Steinmetz and Wivel, 2010: 218). From a perspective of asymmetry, similar dynamics could

apply within NATO (Risse-Kappen, 1995) or perhaps even between Brazil and Uruguay in the less institutionalized Mercosur.

The degree of military threat is not the only relevant way to categorize asymmetrical relationships. Relationships with differing levels of interdependence might demonstrate identifiable patterns (Keohane and Nye, 1977). Proximity is likely to matter; regional versus extra-regional asymmetrical relationships might differ in consistent ways. Lake attempts to identify characteristics of hierarchical relationships that differ from anarchical ones; to the extent truly hierarchical relationships can be identified, different patterns of behavior are likely to exist. Hypo-powers will likely pursue dramatically different approaches in pursuit of their interests.

### **Application of Asymmetrical Analysis**

An asymmetrical focus can facilitate greater cumulation and conversation with other IR scholars. However, these benefits will be greatly enhanced if there is, at least to an extent, a common framework for analysis. How should we study asymmetrical relations? Where should we look for its effects of asymmetry? How should we understand efforts to influence within asymmetry? To use Barnett and Duvall's (2005) framework on power, it would be simple to focus on visible exercises of compulsory power – the understanding of power often linked to Dahl (1957). Interests, agendas, and actions may all be affected by overt pressures. However, the effects of asymmetry, like power itself, are multifaceted. Direct and diffuse manners of power must be considered. Recognizing these effects and incorporating them into the analysis will mitigate some of the disadvantages of the approach, attending to less easily observable effects of power on agendas, interests, and non-decisions. Analysis of asymmetrical relationships should focus on interests, agendas, strategies, interactions, and outcomes.

Asymmetry is likely to affect the formation and definition of national interests, most notably those of the hypo-power, through various mechanisms. Interests respond to a state's current situation, which is likely colored by asymmetry. This does not mean those interests are predetermined by power imbalances, or dictated by the preponderant power. The hypo-power could define its interests in terms of enhancing autonomy vis-à-vis the preponderant power; conversely, it could prioritize other interests and try to ally itself more closely. On the other hand, a preponderant power's interests and even identity can be constituted through its relationships with hypo-powers, which could allow smaller states to draw preponderant powers into local conflicts (Shoemaker and Spanier, 1984) or to include themselves in dominant framings of security (Jourde, 2007). Responding to similar asymmetrical relationships with the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s, Somoza-ruled Nicaragua sought close ties and U.S. support, Guatemala sought greater autonomy (ultimately unsuccessfully), and Costa Rica achieved significant room for maneuver while still benefiting from U.S. security protection (Glejises, 1991; Clark, 1992; Longley, 1997). There is little question the interests and strategies of all three were shaped by how their key asymmetrical relationship structured their incentives, but they were also molded by regime type, domestic politics, and institutional trajectories.

Secondly, asymmetrical analyses should examine the agenda between the involved actors, asking how issues are prioritized and to what extent these reflect the interests of the preponderant power and the hypo-power. As Keohane and Nye (1977) noted in describing complex interdependence, the central priority of a hypo-power may be peripheral to the preponderant power. This point has also been made in recent work on asymmetry (Womack, 2016: 47-51). As an effect of asymmetry, smaller states will struggle to exclude from the agenda an issue of central importance to the preponderant power, but may have to engage in agenda-setting in order to raise

the profile of an issue. As Kingdon (1984) wrote, getting one's issue defined as a problem is itself a political victory.

By starting with interests, as defined in an asymmetrical context, we can examine how hypo-powers pursue their goals. Reversing the eternal logic of Thucydides, one might ask: When and how can 'the weak' do what they wish? In this aspect, the expanding literature on small-state strategies is particularly relevant. How do states' strategic choices vary depending on the nature of the asymmetrical relationship? How do they vary according to issue area? Because the same state may have multiple, salient asymmetrical relationships, we can compare when it chooses one strategy over others in a particular context. The examination of the actions of both the preponderant power and the hypo-power should be rooted in a cogent approach to the study of relational power. Dahl's (1957) framework for the study of power can be applied beyond compulsory power to examine the base, means, scope, and amount of actors' power. In the typical small state/great power division, the focus has been on a narrowly defined base. Instead, we should problematize the bases of power, and ask how the bases of the preponderant power and the hypo-power differ. Ingebritsen (2002) demonstrates how ideational and identity factors can be a base of power for Scandinavian states. Unique economic resources can also be a base for small states. The issue of means is closely linked to the strategies above, and will also differ depending on the goal. Regarding scope and amount, it has often been assumed that 'small states' have interest and ability to affect only a very narrow range of issues to a minimal degree. However, in an asymmetrical approach, these questions can be approached in terms of the conditions under which hypo-powers can exercise influence. What are the limits and possibilities for influence under asymmetry? Finally, while the asymmetrical approach is intuitively bilateral, it could be especially useful if

combined with forms of network analysis. The asymmetrical focus would help emphasize the importance of power – particularly unequal distributions of power – in networks.

Despite these advantages, an asymmetrical perspective does have weaknesses. While it is useful for evaluating the foreign policy of a given state and comparing foreign policies, structural factors as such are less visible. Some aspects of major systemic changes, such as the end of the Cold War, can be understood through hypo-powers' asymmetrical relationships with preponderant powers. Global structures, like those described by Susan Strange (1987) will be less salient through an asymmetrical lens if these structures are, in fact, outside the observable policies of the preponderant power. These structures might still affect the agenda, formulation of interests, and strategies of both parties. Secondly, the asymmetrical focus as developed here is state-centric, and in particular focuses attention on the foreign policies and diplomacies of the states involved. In practice, these will often involve international organizations and even non-state actors, but these will tend to be 'instrumentalized' or treated as aspects of foreign policy strategies or sites for negotiation as opposed to independent actors.

## **Conclusions**

Attempts to define 'small states' and to search for common characteristics in terms of opportunities, limitations, and behaviors have not produced sufficient consensus or cumulation. This has not stopped the production of interesting work, particularly insightful country and regional studies. However, attempts to compare cross-regionally underline the differences between various 'small states.' While relations with great powers have been, unavoidably, an important part of small-state studies, this serves to underline the point. While many of studies of 'small states' respond to and draw on broader strands of IR theory, the communication seems to have been one

way, with fewer explorations of how small states shape the behaviors of great powers (exceptions include Mearsheimer and Walt, 2007; Keohane, 1971).

Studying the dynamics of asymmetrical relationships offers better prospects for comparison, cumulation, and conversation. The focus coincides with the fundamentally relational approach to power that, in practice, already dominates the subfield. Because ‘smallness’ is, perhaps inextricably, linked with the scarcity of resources associated with a realist elements of national power approach, it has required scholars to jump through conceptual hoops to highlight other forms of power. Defining the object of study as the asymmetrical relationship – dyadically or through networks of relationships – is consistent with the concept of power needed to explore the agency of ‘small states.’ An explicit focus on asymmetry brings ‘small states’ into more nuanced conversations about power in IR. To break the connection between definition and resource possession, this article has advocated a switch in terminology from ‘small’ and ‘large’ to preponderant powers and hypo-powers. More important than the semantics, however, is to switch to a perspective that departs not from the point of weakness but from the notion that the actions of states formerly known as small are relevant, and perhaps central, to understanding the actions of preponderant powers – and international relations more broadly.

An asymmetrical focus has important advantages over previous approaches focused on absolute smallness. It directly engages with IR debates about power and influence. It places the subfield in discussion with scholars who are more interested in great powers and offers important insights into relationships that have been examined under the rubric of hierarchy. Examining diverse asymmetrical relationships will allow for comparison and cumulation that has thus far been in short supply by providing new ways to examine ‘small states’ across the world. The questions coming from this approach could include: What are the characteristics of given relationships that

promote or limit influence? What strategies do these states share, and how are they conditioned by asymmetrical relational dynamics?

This is not a call to start over, or to jettison sixty years of scholarship, but to build on those insights in a different way. Much of what has been learned in small-state studies is relevant to the dynamics of asymmetrical relationships and to how hypo-powers manage these relationships. This is particularly true with regards to recent studies of foreign policies and strategies. An asymmetrical focus will amplify the utility of that work by providing a structure for comparison. The scope conditions of this work – the states to which it could be expected to generalize – have been stuck in part on the lack of definition. Identifying salient characteristics of the relationships involved offers a new way to generalize. We should keep studying small states, but it is time to for a changed perspective.



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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> While the opposition of hyper-power and hypo-power is appealing, the term 'hyper-power,' coming from the former French Foreign Minister Hubert Védérine's *hyperpuissance*, has a strong connection with the United States as the world's sole hyper-power.

<sup>2</sup> This mistake is made in the organization of the contributions to Hey 2003, as well as in earlier works like Handel 1981.