

# How Should we Study the Foreign Policies of Small European States?

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## Resumo

### *Como Devemos Estudar as Políticas Externas dos Pequenos Estados Europeus?*

Este artigo examina criticamente o quadro geral da investigação relativa aos estudos sobre pequenos Estados. Mais do que apresentar resultados empíricos, enfatiza *como* é que as relações internacionais dos pequenos Estados têm vindo a ser estudadas na literatura académica. Após esta análise crítica, alarga a discussão pela inclusão da Análise de Política Externa (APE), a fim de avaliar em que medida o estudo dos pequenos Estados pode beneficiar dos debates desenvolvidos no quadro daquela disciplina. Os problemas internos da APE são discutidos em virtude da fragmentação de abordagens. O artigo propõe um quadro referencial integrado de análise de todos os tipos de política externa, incluindo a dos pequenos Estados, concluindo que as políticas externas dos pequenos Estados podem ser estudadas da mesma maneira que as políticas externas de outras categorias de Estados. Esta sistematização implica a criação de um quadro referencial integrado e inclusivo.

## Abstract

*This contribution starts off with a very brief overview and critique of some of the past and current research contributions to small state studies. The aim here is to highlight how the international relations of small states have been studied, rather than to present substantive empirical results of such research. After this critical analysis the discussion will be broadened by looking at the current status of foreign policy analysis (FPA) as such, and to ascertain to what extent small state studies can benefit from debates within the latter. However, since it is argued that FPA itself has problems due to its fragmentation into various largely incompatible approaches, the paper concludes with a brief presentation of an integrative framework for the analysis of all types of foreign policy, including those of small states. My message is essentially that the foreign policies of small states should be studied in the same manner as the foreign policy behaviour of all other types of states, and that in order for this to be feasible, we need an integrative framework which works equally well for both of these purposes.*

## Introduction

In one of the few recent overviews of the current condition of research on the international relations of small states, Olav Knudsen poses the question of where “do small-state studies find themselves at the present juncture”, and concludes laconically: “Apparently, not entirely at the forefront of world affairs”.<sup>1</sup> Along the same lines the two editors of an even more recent contribution to this field note that the “study of small states as a specific research category reached its peak in the mid-1970’s”, and refer to Peter Baehr’s conclusion (in 1975) “that the concept of small states was not a useful analytical tool for understanding world politics”.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, both of these contributions then go on to argue for why we should *not* accept these conclusions, since (as Neumann and Gstöhl argue) small state studies “are still a relatively young discipline occupying a niche position in IR,” and that this “niche holds considerable potential for future research, both on individual small states and on theoretical aspects relevant to IR”.<sup>3</sup> The task I have taken upon myself is to give these claims a closer look, specifically with the view of providing some pointers on appropriate approaches to the study of the foreign and security policies of the small European states.

This discussion will proceed in the following manner. In the next section a very brief overview of some of the past and current research contributions to small state studies will be presented and thereafter critically discussed. The aim here is to highlight *how* the international relations of small states have been studied, rather than presenting substantive empirical results of such research. In short, the discussion here will concentrate on second-order issues of conceptualization and analytic approaches, not on the historical development of the international relations of small states or on the status of its empirical analysis today. After this critique of the past and current condition of ‘small state studies’ the discussion will be broadened by looking at the current status of foreign policy analysis (FPA) as such, and to what extent small state studies can benefit from debates within it. However, since I argue that FPA itself has problems due to its fragmentation into various incompatible approaches, I will conclude with a brief the presentation of an integrative framework for the analysis of all types of foreign policy, including those of small states, which – I argue – has the potential of enriching both fields of study.

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1 Knudsen, 2002: 182.

2 Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 11, 12.

3 Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 16.

## Small States in the Study of International Relations: The Past and the Present

For all practical purposes the modern analysis of the international relations of small European states was established by Annette Baker Fox in her landmark book on *The Power of Small States*, published in 1959.<sup>4</sup> In it she inquired into how the governments of small states such as Sweden, Spain, Turkey, Switzerland, Ireland and Portugal avoided being drawn into the Second World War, while other similarly small and weak states failed to do so. Her answer was simple: through skilful diplomacy and favourable geostrategic location they were able to convince the great powers that continued neutrality on the part of the small state was advantageous to these powers.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent studies latched on to this issue of how small states could survive the dominance of the greater powers and mitigate the effects of structural constraints.<sup>6</sup> As noted by Neumann and Gstöhl, “a whole branch of research focused on the question of which policies might help prevent or reduce the consequences of smallness and scarcity”.<sup>7</sup> Apart from studies of this kind – pursued almost exclusively by European scholars (usually themselves from small states) – focusing essentially on various strategies for the survival of small states, a more ‘scientific’ interest emerged in the wake of the comparative foreign policy analysis movement in the United States. Here a major hypothesis, posited in order to facilitate generalisations, was that states of similar size or power tend to behave in similar ways in their foreign policies, and hence that the decision-making processes within these would differ from those of more powerful states.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to larger states, it was claimed, small states focused more than large states on joint actions, working within international forums and giving economic issues priority.

Most of these hypotheses and generalisations were subsequently falsified, and as a consequence “these approaches to small states were not much further developed in the 1980s and early 1990s.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as argued by Niels Amstrup, despite the ‘scientific’ ambitions driving comparative foreign policy scholars, there was “an astonishing lack of accumulation” in small state studies during this period, while another Danish scholar noted how these studies suffered from “benign neglect” within the larger field

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4 Annette Baker Fox, 1959.

5 See Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 9-10.

6 Ulf Lindell and Stefan Persson, 1986.

7 Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 10.

8 Maurice A. East, 1973.

9 Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 12.

of International Relations (IR).<sup>10</sup> However, despite these pessimistic assessments, described as a 'standstill' in small state studies, Neumann and Gstöhl nevertheless perceive a 'revival' on the horizon, propelled by international, economic and technological developments once again favouring this field of study. "The improvements in communication and transportation as well as the liberalization of the movement of goods, services, capital and even persons and public procurement," they argue, "rendered borders less meaningful to the benefit of small states".<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in addition to these processes of globalisation and regional integration, they also argue that "small state theory has been promoted and challenged by the unprecedented emergence of new small states in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Baltics after the fall of the Berlin wall".<sup>12</sup> They also point to new theoretical developments within IR favouring small state studies - in particular social constructivism with its strong focus on international norms, identity and ideas. Hence, they note, if in addition to relative power (the focus of neorealists) and institutions (as emphasised by neoliberals) also ideational factors matter, small states may gain new scope in their foreign policy:

They may, for instance, be able to play the role of norm entrepreneurs influencing world politics; they may not only engage in bargaining with other (greater) powers, but also to argue with them, pursuing framing and discursive politics, and socially construct new, more favourable identities in their relationships.<sup>13</sup>

It is at this point in their overview that they (as quoted in the beginning) wish to emphasise the potential of this field for establishing its own niche within IR, which would benefit not only the study of particular small states but also the theoretical development of IR itself. But how persuasive is this conclusion and how feasible is the recommendation?

My own view on this is the following. First of all, as already noted above, a major reason why small state theory came to a standstill was the assumption that such states were so different from other actors that they needed to be dealt with as a distinct class of entities. More specifically, there was often a failure in this literature

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10 Niels Amstrup, 1976: 178; Wilhelm Christmas-Möller, 1983: 39.

11 Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 13.

12 Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 13.

13 Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006: 14-15.

in distinguishing between first-order substantive empirical issues and second-order questions pertaining to the classification of phenomena. Hence, it was easy to draw the facile conclusion that since small states often behaved differently from larger states, they ipso facto represented a different class of entities and hence required to be treated analytically in terms of a theoretical domain of their own – ‘small state theory’. But such a conflation of these two levels of analysis is very questionable indeed, both for conceptual and empirical reasons.

Conceptually, all states today are defined in terms of the same formal criteria of statehood, and these have nothing to do with size. Size only enters into the picture when comparing states empirically – as one possible factor explaining differences or similarities between the actions of states. Size is thus an empirical not a conceptual attribute. Furthermore, empirically there is no warranty for the assumption (or hypothesis) that small states tend to behave in a similar fashion, and large states in a similar fashion. For example, although the Nordic states are all small, what has characterised their foreign policy behaviour is not in the first hand similarity but difference – Sweden and Finland opted for neutrality after World War II, while Norway and Denmark joined NATO. And even though the first two states ostensibly pursued a similar foreign policy stance, in actual fact we are here confronted with two fundamentally different forms of neutrality. The same goes for Austria and Switzerland.<sup>14</sup> And although both Norway and Denmark decided to ally themselves with a military alliance headed by the United States, they did so in terms of different membership conditions. And although Denmark has been a long-standing member of the EU, Norway continues to remain outside the Union.

A second issue which, in my judgement, has undermined small state studies is the problem of demarcation: how to draw a clear line between smallness and bigness – and everything in between on such a scale.<sup>15</sup> Barry Buzan has recently posited a distinction between superpowers, great powers and regional powers, which has involved him in an extensive conceptual discussion and the difficult task of ‘rethinking definitions’.<sup>16</sup> In my view, his conceptual problem is significantly easier to solve than the problem of empirically distinguishing between the far larger number and motley types of micro states, small states, medium sized states, larger states, and so forth, which populate

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<sup>14</sup> See my discussion in Carlsnaes, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Baehr, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> Buzan, 2004.

the international system and are members of the United Nations. Indeed, even if we limit ourselves to European states, this is a task which will inevitably lead to controversy and perhaps even be viewed as an essentially contestable issue. This problem is further exacerbated if we define size in terms of capacity in some sense or other, since that would be to beg an important empirical question in the study of small states: their relative capacity in pursuing foreign policies of their own choice. It is for these and similar reasons that Knudsen avers that it "is primarily in the study of small states in the context of an international confrontation with great powers, or of small states as units in a context of a particular external *problematique* (e.g. globalisation) that the small-state concept can defend its utility."<sup>17</sup> But once we follow this track we are no longer in the business of conceptualising or operationalising size; rather, we have taken the empirical route of placing a given state within a larger substantive context, i.e., viewing it in relation to other empirical entities deemed to differ substantially in terms of size. This brings the notion of relativity into the picture: in some relational contexts a given state may be deemed small compared to other states, while in other contexts they would not. This is one reason why Buzan has introduced the notion of regional powers to distinguish them from both superpowers and great powers. Thus while, e.g., South Africa is viewed as a regional great power, it is arguably not viewed as a great power in the context of the larger international system.<sup>18</sup>

The conclusion which I draw from these considerations is that the international relations of small states should not be analysed as if they belonged to a distinct class of their own, but rather as that of any other state. In other words, I see no reason why the same analytical framework should not be used for studying the foreign and security policies of both large and small states alike, especially in view of the dormant and problematic nature of small state studies compared to the very active status of foreign policy analysis (FPA) today. I will therefore now turn to a brief consideration of the current nature of the latter, and then to the question of how – given the problems inherent in this sub-field of IR as well – a common framework for the study of the foreign policies of small and large states alike could possibly look like.

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17 Knudsen, 2002: 185.

18 See Buzan, 2004: 63-72.

## Foreign Policy Analysis Today: Any Help Here?

What characterizes the condition of FPA today, and are there any lessons that the study of the foreign policies of small states can learn from recent debates within it? The good news here is that that, on the whole, a consensus exists today on the nature of the explanandum (that which is to be explained), although it has taken a circuitous route for scholars to reach this point of relative agreement. In my interpretation, this consensus boils down to a specification of the unit of analysis that emphasizes the *purposive* nature of foreign policy actions, a focus on *policy undertakings* and the crucial role of *state-like boundaries*.<sup>19</sup>

The bad news is that here scholarly agreement within FPA ends. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, beyond a general agreement on *what* to study and to explain, there is no consensus *how* such studies should be conducted, with the result that we are presented with a number of different approaches in the literature.<sup>20</sup> These can be structured in terms of the following matrix, in which the horizontal dimension pertains to issues of epistemology in social theory (essentially along the lines of Max Weber's celebrated distinction between *Erklären* and *Verstehen*), while the vertical dimension expresses the classical ontological choice between holistic and individualistic approaches to social science explanations:

	<i>Ontology</i>	<i>Epistemology</i>
	<b>Naturalism</b>	<b>Interpretativism</b>
<b>Holism</b>	<i>Structural perspective</i>	<i>Social-institutional perspective</i>
<b>Individualism</b>	<i>Agency-based perspective</i>	<i>Interpretative actor perspective</i>

**Fig. 1: Four Rock-Bottom Perspectives in Foreign Policy Analysis**

In an overview of current FPA we find, first of all, an array of (i) *agency-based* approaches to the study of foreign policy actions, focusing either on the role of individuals and groups in the foreign policy process or on the cognitive and psychological characteristics of decision-makers. So-called bureaucratic politics and liberal approaches can also be said to belong to this category. A second major group of current analytical

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<sup>19</sup> Carlsnaes, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Carlsnaes, 2002.

frameworks is premised on a (ii) *structural* rather than agency-based perspective in the analysis of state behaviour. Various forms – old and new – of realism are to be found here, as well as neoliberal institutionalism, which in many respects is simply a benign version of the former. A third category of approaches, which have become increasingly prominent during the past decade and half, are premised on a (iii) *social-institutional* perspective (with social constructivist roots), and here we can distinguish between a sociologically oriented ('thin' constructivism) and a more discursive strand. Finally, there is also what can be called an (iv) *interpretative actor* perspective within FPA, a more traditional mode of analysis essentially based on the reconstruction of the reasoning of individual or group decision-makers. In summary form, these various approaches can be listed as follows:

**Structural Perspective**

*Realism/Neorealism*  
*Neo-liberal Institutionalism*  
*Organisational Process Approaches*

**Social-Institutional Perspective**

*Social Constructivism*  
*Discursive Approaches*

**Agency-Based Perspective**

*Cognitive and Psychological Approaches*  
*Bureaucratic Politics Approach*  
*Liberal Approach*

**Interpretative Actor Perspective**

*Intentional Analysis*

**Table 1: Four Perspectives and Nine Approaches in Foreign Policy Analysis**

What are we as scholars of the foreign policies of small states to do in view of this rich flora of alternative approaches to FPA? Two options seem to confront us: either to accept this state of affairs, and to follow whichever route suits our predilections best; or to opt for some form of synthetic approach which would combine the various explanatory components contained in the approaches sketched above. The former is the easier choice, but it comes at some considerable costs, both for the foreign policy analyst in general and those particularly interested in analysing the foreign policies of smaller states.

For FPA as such the problem is that by choosing any one of these approaches means that we must exclude those aspects which it is not capable of addressing. The



major such drawback here is that it confronts us head-on with the agency-structure problem, the implications of which are neatly illustrated in the discussion above: scholars focusing on explaining policies either view actors as the prime cause of policy actions, or give structures this role. The problem is that it is generally recognised that in real life actors and structures do not exist in a zero-sum relationship but, rather, that human agents and social structures are in a fundamental sense dynamically interrelated entities, and hence we cannot account fully for the one without invoking the other. None of the approaches discussed above has resolved this problem, since each tends to privilege either actors or structures in their explanations.

For analysts of the foreign policy of small states this problem is compounded by the fact that at least some of these approaches, especially those based on a structural perspective, are biased in favour of the analysis of powerful rather than small states. This aspect can also be phrased in terms of the dominance within IR and FPA of North American scholarship, and hence a primary focus on American foreign policy. But even scholars who are obviously not in the grip of this American intellectual dominance, such as Barry Buzan, are nevertheless led, as a result of an essentially structuralist perspective, to focus their attentions not on small state behaviour but on those of the major powers.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, if one instead opts for an agency-based approach, which does not have such large state bias, the temptation is to downplay structural factors which, one can assume with regard to small states, are particularly constraining in terms of available policy choices. In short, we are then back with the agency-structure problem, and an essentially lop-sided view of the relationship between actors and their structural environments.<sup>22</sup>

### **An Alternative Approach**

My own view is that a synthetic framework for analysing foreign policy is therefore necessary if we are to escape these and other problems. I also believe that such a framework is analytically feasible, but that it has to be positioned on a level of abstraction that does not substantively prejudge explanation in favour of any particular type or combination of empirical factors. Since I have elaborated on it elsewhere, I will here

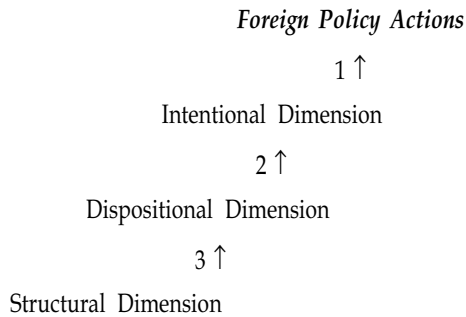
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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Buzan 2004.

<sup>22</sup> On these issues, see Carlsnaes, 2007.

simply give a skeletal outline of the explanatory logic of such a suggested synthetic framework of analysis.<sup>23</sup>

The starting point is the claim that while the meta-theoretical matrix used above is specifically designed for the purpose of classifying approaches to foreign policy analysis in terms of their most fundamental ontological and epistemological presuppositions, it is less suitable for empirical analysis itself as distinguished from meta-theoretical dissection. At the same time foreign policy action in 'real life' is arguably always a combination of *purposive* behaviour, *cognitive-psychological* factors and the various *structural* phenomena characterizing societies and their environments; hence explanations of actual foreign policy actions must be able to give accounts that do not by definition exclude or privilege any of these types of explanans. Insofar as the matrix used above does have such exclusionary implications, it simply will not be able to deliver the goods in this respect. Thus, rather than thinking in terms of a logic of mutual exclusion, I suggest that we instead conceptualise such a synthetic analytic framework in terms of a tripartite approach to foreign policy actions (the explanandum) consisting respectively of an *intentional*, a *dispositional* and a *structural* dimension of explanation (the explanans), as follows:



**Fig. 2: Explaining Foreign Policy Actions**

Although conceptualised as analytically autonomous, these three dimensions should be viewed as closely linked in the sense that they can be conjoined in a logical, step-by-step manner to produce increasingly exhaustive (or 'deeper') explanations of foreign policy actions.

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<sup>23</sup> Carlsnaes, 1992; 1994; 2002.

The starting point in such an explanation would be to focus on the first link, i.e., the relation between a given foreign policy action and the intention or goal that it expresses (arrow 1 in the figure). This is a *teleological* relationship, giving us the specific *reason(s)* for, or *goal(s)* of, a certain policy undertaking. This is also a *necessary* first step, given the intentional nature of the explanandum. An illustrative example of this type of analysis is Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice's detailed study of German reunification.<sup>24</sup> It offers an insider's view of the innermost workings of the top political elites of the U.S., the Soviet Union, West Germany, East Germany, Britain and France in the creation, following a series of top-level negotiations, of a reunited Germany. Their analysis examines the reasoning behind the choices made by these elites, and proffers an explanation of the immense changes that occurred during the year following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in terms of this reasoning.

However, scholars who are interested also in giving *causal* in addition to intentional explanations will want to go further than this. This distinction can also be described in terms of an 'in order to' and a 'because of' dimension in explanations, in which the former refers to actions pursued intentionally (i.e., in order to achieve a certain aim), while the latter aims to indicate those prior or underlying mechanisms which 'caused' a given actor to have this but not that intention in the first place. Thus scholars not satisfied with merely tracing descriptively the reasoning behind a certain action will want to ask why one rather than another intention in the form of a policy undertaking was being pursued in the first place.

In such an analysis the next step would be to trace the link between the intentional and the dispositional dimensions, with a view to finding the particular and underlying psychological-cognitive factors which have *disposed* a particular actor to have this and not that preference or intention (arrow 2 in the figure). In the analysis of such dispositions the primary focus would be on the underlying values (or belief systems) which motivate actors to pursue certain goals, as well as on the perceptions which make actors see the world in particular ways (world-views). This is where cognitive and psychological approaches to the explanation of foreign policy enter into the analytic picture. In the case of German unification, for example, in-depth leadership analyses of the various individual statesmen would be relevant in explaining the actor dispositions of the main protagonists.

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<sup>24</sup> Zelikow and Rice, 1995.

This leaves us with the question how structural factors are to be incorporated into this framework, since they are present in neither of the first two dimensions. In my view, they do so in terms of a third, 'deeper' and very powerful structural dimension, always underlying and thus affecting the cognitive and psychological dispositions of individuals (arrow 3 in the figure). These structural factors - domestic and international, social, cultural, economic or material - do so in many ways, but essentially as a consequence of being perceived, reacted to and taken into account by actors; and it is in this sense that structural factors can be said to influence, condition or otherwise affect human values, preferences, moods and attitudes - i.e., actor dispositions as here conceptualised. Furthermore, as conceived here, this link between underlying structures and actors can be conceived as both constraining and enabling, causally affecting the dispositional characteristics of the agents of policy, which in turn determine the particular types of intentions motivating policies. In the case of German unification, such structural factors would be the end of the Cold War, the economic decline of the Soviet Union, the group dynamics of the persons involved in the negotiations, the continued consolidation of a peaceful European Community - to name but a few.

Although the example used above pertains to the foreign policy actions of some of the major powers, the same explanatory logic can be applied to the analysis of actions pursued by the elites of small states. In other words, this is not only a synthetic, integrative framework for analysing foreign policy, but one which is neutral to the issue of size and power. These, and other factors, enter into the equation as possible empirical factors which help explain any given foreign policy actions rather than as *ex ante* components defining the unit of analysis itself. This conceptualisation is essential if the study of the foreign policies of small states is to move from the condition of the 'standstill' which has characterised it for too long, to one of 'revival' and indeed maturity as a full-fledged field of study worthy of full membership within International Relations.

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