

# SMALL STATES AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

*The War in Ukraine signals a return to the sphere of influence politics and great powers' use of military instruments against their weaker neighbors. The consequences for small states are negative. Although some small states will find new opportunities for hedging and brinkmanship, most small states will see their chances of shaping international agendas reduced as they increasingly focus on defensive aims. To meet these challenges small states must work together to promote their shared interests: 1) A modus vivendi between the great power, which minimizes the risk of great power war as well as the annexation and invasion of smaller states, 2) a rule-based international order; 3) a relaunch the United Nations as the central arena for debates on international society among sovereign states.*

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**T**he War in Ukraine marks a return to militarized great power rivalry. The war is yet another manifestation of the liberal international order's ongoing crisis, which began with the attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001. It has continued with controversial and ultimately unsuccessful wars in Afghanistan and Iraq since the early 2000s, a near collapse of the international financial system followed by a global economic crisis in the late 2000s, and the rise of increasingly nationalist responses to international security.

This development presents small states with several challenges – no matter if they are “loyal supporters and helpful fixers” of the liberal international order (like some of the the small states in Northern Europe),<sup>1</sup> seeking full membership of the order and its core institutions (like a number of the small states in the post-Soviet space and the Asia-Pacific region), or more critical of the adverse consequences of liberal ordering and globalization (like many small states in the Global South). This article identifies the challenges, discusses their potential implications for small states in international affairs, and points to possible ways of meeting them.<sup>2</sup>

### *How and Why the War in Ukraine Matters to Small States*

The War in Ukraine matters to small states for two reasons. Most importantly, it matters because it is an inter-state war. The number of inter-state wars reached a historical low in 2020 after declining substantially since World War II ended.<sup>3</sup> Strong institutions, norms of self-determination, and the declining returns on conquest in a globalized world created the most beneficial international environment since the birth of the modern state system.<sup>4</sup> The most important effect was transforming the fundamental challenge of small states in international relations from “how do we survive as an independent political entity?” to “how do we maximize influence to meet our challenges and take advantage of our opportunities?”<sup>5</sup> The War in Ukraine reminds us that for many small states in international affairs, great power invasion remains a threat to be reckoned with.

<sup>1</sup> Rita Abrahamsen, Louise Riis Andersen and Ole Jacob Sending “Introduction: Making liberal internationalism great again?,” *International Journal*, Volume 74, No. 1 (2019): p. 5-14. See p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> I understand small states as “states that are characterized by the limited capacity of their political, economic and administrative systems” and internationally typically find themselves as the weaker actors in asymmetric relationships that they can do little to change on their own. See Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel “Small states: Concepts and Theories,” in Godfrey Baldacchino and Anders Wivel *Handbook on the Politics of Small states* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2020): p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Cashman and Leonard C. Robinson *An Introduction to the Causes of War: Patterns of Interstate Conflict from World War I to Iraq* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Matthias Maass *The small states in World Politics: The Story of Small State Survival, 1648–2016* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See the discussion in Anders Wivel Wivel “The Grand Strategies of Small states”. In T Balzacq, & R. R. Krebs (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Grand Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021): p. 490-505.

This has important consequences for small-state foreign policy as more small states may opt for defensive strategies emphasizing national security rather than seeking to shape international agendas.

The second reason that the War in Ukraine matters to small states is that it is the so far clearest manifestation of sphere of influence politics in the post-Cold War world. The post-Cold War liberal international order, dubbed “Liberal Internationalism 3.0” by G. John Ikenberry, was global in scope, increasingly intrusive of state sovereignty, and kept together by a rule-based governing structure combined with network-based methods of collaboration.<sup>6</sup> Some policymakers and academics, including Ikenberry, saw it as post-hegemonic, but it was supported by the United States’ ability and willingness to promote a globalized international order based on a deeper and broader understanding of President Woodrow Wilson’s vision for international society after World War I. This is what we have come to call “the liberal international order.”

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Recently, “spheres of influence” have come back as a central idea in international relations, which threatens this order and its political and institutional manifestations.<sup>7</sup> Some recent examples of this trend include China’s territorial claims and military construction in the South China Sea, Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Moreover, it is possible to extend this list with the previous administration of the United States’ endorsement of the Monroe Doctrine and the necessity and desirability of dividing the world into “one of the grand spheres of influence apportioned to the United States, China, and Russia.”<sup>8</sup> At first glance, President Biden’s “Alliance for Democracy” might look like a return to “Liberal Internationalism 3.0.” Still, the administration’s sustained focus on a “foreign policy

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<sup>6</sup> G. John Ikenberry “Liberal internationalism 3.0: America and the dilemmas of liberal world order,” *Perspectives on Politics*, Volume 7, No. 1 (2009): p. 71-87.

<sup>7</sup> Graham Allison “The New Spheres of Influence,” *Foreign Affairs*, Volume 99, No. 2 (2020): p. 30-40.

<sup>8</sup> Nathan Gardels “Trump is not the leader of the U.S. – just of his base”, *The Washington Post*, 19 July 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/theworldpost/wp/2018/07/19/trump-us/>

for the middle class” indicates that a different international order is being accepted and even promoted.<sup>9</sup>

Great power acceptance and promotion of a sphere of influence-order have three implications for small states. First, it creates new dividing lines between insiders, outsiders and in-betweeners in the emergent order(s). Small states stuck inside a great power’s sphere of influence see their autonomy reduced as great powers become less willing to negotiate the rules of engagement. This has for some time been evident in the post-Soviet space and the South China Sea. More recently, small states in the Euro-Atlantic community have faced increased demands and expectations of defence spending. The United States is increasingly conducting bilateral negotiations and concluding bilateral agreements with small Euro-Atlantic allies securing U.S. access to critical infrastructure such as ports in return for U.S. security shelter.

In contrast, small states located outside the great powers’ immediate orbit may see an increase in autonomy. In the first decades after the end of the Cold War, many of these states found themselves increasingly on the margins of the liberal international order having lost their Cold War bargaining power when courted by the Soviet Union and the United States. Today, these countries show that the resurgence of geopolitics isn’t all negative for tiny nations. For example, basing rights may be awarded based on a country’s location, and small countries’ access to rare earth and metals makes them attractive cooperation partners for the world’s superpowers. Like in the Cold War, great power rivalry increases some small states opportunities for hedging and playing hard to get. Finally, the War in Ukraine shows how states caught in-between spheres of influence are in the most precarious position. Some will rush for shelter – as illustrated by the eagerness of Sweden and Finland to give up their status as non-aligned - others will not be allowed the luxury of deciding their own fate as illustrated by the Russian annexation of Crimea and subsequent invasion of Ukraine.

Second, the War in Ukraine illustrates how differences between spheres are increasing. In a sphere of influence-world, power politics becomes more important, but so does the ideological underpinnings of the spheres. The opportunities and challenges of small states are affected not only by their limited capabilities and the probability of military conflict but also their ideological distance to and ideological substance of the great power(s), whose orbit the the small states are part of.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Andrew Gawthorpe “Taking US foreign policy for the middle class seriously,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Volume 45, No. 1 (2022): p. 57-75.

<sup>10</sup> Birthe Hansen, Peter Toft and Anders Wivel *Security Strategies and American World Order: Lost Power* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).

It matters if the hegemon leads through diplomacy and institutions or by military threats and action, and it matters if the small state agrees or disagrees with the regional hegemon on fundamental values. The the small states in the Euro-Atlantic community may feel the pressure from the United States to spend more on defence and face limitations on decisions on critical infrastructure and trade, but the United States continues to be their best bet to preserve national security, not a threat against it.

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Finally, a more militarized, more regionalized, and more marked by great power competition international order alters the foreign policy roles accessible to small nations as well as the costs and advantages of performing these positions. It also creates more variation among small states on which roles may benefit the state. For instance, whereas non-alignment becomes potentially more costly in the borderlands between spheres of influence, it is coming back in other parts of the international system. As noted by Shivshankar Menon in *Foreign Policy*, “[t]he more the United States, Russia, China, or other powers pressure other countries to choose sides, the more those countries will be drawn to strategic autonomy”.<sup>11</sup>

### ***What Should Small States Do?***

Small states respond differently to the the War in Ukraine, because they are affected by the war in different ways and vary in their capabilities and capacities to meet the challenges following the war. Nordic non-aligned countries Finland and Sweden were quick to apply for membership of NATO. They were welcomed by most NATO members, because they are democratic, resilient and able to strengthen NATO by their geopolitical location, knowledge and competencies of the Baltic Sea and the High North, military capabilities, and ability and willingness to invest in defence in the future. In contrast, many other small states have no options to seek security shelter or prefer to ‘go-it-alone’ by neutrality, hedging or brinkmanship.

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<sup>11</sup> Shivshankar Menon “A New Cold War May Call for a Return to Nonalignment,” *Foreign Policy* (Summer 2022): p. 34-35.

Despite variation in capabilities, options, and preferences, small states share at least three interests in reconstructing international order after the War in Ukraine. First, small states have an interest in a *modus vivendi* between the great powers, which minimizes the risk of great power war as well as the annexation and invasion of smaller states. This requires accepting a less-than-perfect international order from small states and great powers. Great powers will have to accept the co-existence of visions for domestic and international orders rivalling their own. Small states will have to accept an order in which the great powers have a special role in maintaining and developing international society. This is not too different from previous eras in the history of the modern state system. Still, it is different from the “new world order” vision promoted by the United States in the immediate post-Cold War era and Liberal Internationalism 3.0, which in many ways was implementing that vision.

Second, small states have an interest in a rule-based international order. A rules-based international order is good for the small states because it creates a level playing field (because everyone has to follow the same rules) and makes it expensive for big powers to break the rules (at the very least they need to spend resources on explaining why and risk the loss of status and influence).<sup>12</sup> Luckily for the small states, we have a rule-based international order, which has so far proven relatively resilient despite ongoing crisis. However, at a time when great powers are more explicit about their national interests, and more likely to view these interests as independent from – or even detrimental to – a rule-based order, the small states need to step up, if they are to preserve and develop the rule-based international order. The lessons from the Covid19 pandemic will prove helpful in this regard. With great power relations in crisis and stronger states focused on their own national interests, small managed to network on knowledge sharing and best practices, while simultaneously using this to boost their own international status.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, small states should aim to relaunch the United Nations as the central arena for debates on international society and an important platform for action. For the small states in the West, this requires humility and willingness to scale down some of the more ambitious initiatives from the past decades to remake the UN as a the organization, it was originally intended to be: a forum for voice and negotiation among sovereign states.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Iver B. Neumann and Sieglind Gstöhl “Introduction: Lilliputians in Gulliver’s World?” in Christine Ingebritsen, Iver Neumann, Sieglinde Gstöhl and Jessica Beyer (eds.) *Small states in International Relations* (Seattle: University of Washington Press): p. 3-36, see p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> Revecca Pedi and Anders “Small State Diplomacy after the Corona Crisis,” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, Volume 15, No. 4 (2020): p. 611-623.

<sup>14</sup> Louise Riis Andersen “Curb your enthusiasm: Middle-power liberal internationalism and the future of the United Nations,” *International Journal*, Volume 74, No. 1 (2019): p. 47-64.

Fortunately, they will find much support from non-Western small states agreeing to Winston Churchill's old maxim that "Jaw Jaw is better than War War", but skeptical of how the liberal agenda has been pursued over the past decades.

### *Concluding on Small States and the War in Ukraine*

Russia's interventions in Ukraine exemplify a return to classical great power foreign policy instruments: annexation and invasion. However, at the same time it illustrates why these instruments have gone out of fashion. Like the United States and its allies in Afghanistan and Iraq, Russia has a hard time securing victory over what seemed to be a much weaker enemy. To be sure, military instruments have been part of the great power foreign policy toolbox since the advent of the modern state system. The U.S.-led "liberal wars of choice" were part of, or maybe even a consequence of, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0". Nonetheless, a reasonably peaceful and stable international order was ensured by robust rules on the right to self-determination, strong international institutions, and shared great power interests in a globalized international system, allowing even small states to pursue riches, security, and (niche) influence in international affairs.

The war has refocused international attention on the importance of military might and reminded small states of their vulnerability in case of great power rivalry and conflict. They are now more dependent on regional security complexes and less affected by global dynamics in a post-unipolar international system seemingly drifting towards "non-polarity", rather than a new bipolar or multipolar order. In this emerging order, small states need "to choose their battles wisely, to prioritize their resources and to foster networks with other small states seeking to survive and thrive in a post-unipolar international order."<sup>15</sup> Small state success in this endeavour requires both the willingness of small states to accept a privileged role for great powers, and the ability to foster an international order, which remains rule-based and relaunches the UN as the central arena for voicing interests and finding solutions that may not be perfect, but still better than death and destruction.

<sup>15</sup> Rebecca Pedt and Anders Wivel "What Future for Small states After Unipolarity? Strategic Opportunities and Challenges in the Post-American World Order," in Nina Græger, Bertel Heurlin, Ole Wæver and Anders Wivel (eds.) *Polarity in International Relations: Past, Present, Future* (Cham: Palgrave, 2022): p. 127-147, see p. 142.