

FACULTY LECTURE 9

Strategies for Small-State Survival

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Prefatory Note

Structures, hypotheses, fresh tools of analyses, new trends, reflections on the art behind the science, or the science behind the art: these are among the chief themes, issues and provocations that engage those who teach and study the several disciplines brought together in our Faculty.

Distinguished scholars contribute to the enterprise, as Visiting Professors, External Examiners, or when they make a brief stay, through lectures and seminars they give in the Departments. Some have addressed Faculty. The general response has been so positive as to suggest that at least a selection of lectures should be made more widely available. Apart from those not able to be present, scholars elsewhere are likely to have an interest in them.

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Strategies for Small-State Survival

Some 370 years ago, Miguel de Cervantes let Don Quixote exclaim that "There are but two families in the world, Have-much and Have-little." He thus states a perpetual fact of life, that of inequality as a cause for division. More than two thousand years earlier, Aristotle told us in his *POLITICS* that "Inferiors revolt in order that they may be equal, and equals that they may be superior." What is true for man is also true for his creation, the nation state.

The finiteness of our globe supports the maxim that as the number of countries increases, their size will become smaller. The probability of friction escalates geometrically with the expanse of national borders. Ideological subversion and industrial competition add further potentialities of conflict. In this climate of instability, a small state cannot find security in mere numerical equivalents of diverse weapon systems or the speculativeness of presumed threats. The acquisition of military hardware, the implementation of a national service, or efforts to improve civil defense can be just tactics in search of a comprehensive strategy.

For small states at the circumference of superpower activity, the philosophical foundations for security must be viewed in a total context. The ultimate criterion for policy is survival, not victory. Because of its pervasive nature, the debate over strategies for national survival cannot be confined to the corridors of power nor to the anterooms of military planning. The evolution of a defense concept involves the citizenry as much as the international community. Prevailing tensions and open warfare indicate that a correct combination of strategies has not yet been adopted. If the survival of the small state is

at stake, there is need for considering new approaches to old practices.

Before proceeding, let me preface my remarks with some caveats. The subsequent discussion will not be focussed on any particular state but will examine small countries *SUI GENERIS* — as a class by themselves. No ethical evaluations will be made such as the proposition that a small state is more just because it is too minute to uphold injustice. If this argument were pursued to its logical conclusion, “great” powers would not be great but merely populous. It is also not the intention here to follow in Machiavelli’s footsteps by providing prescriptions for rulers; on the contrary, what is to follow are mere observations analyzed against a background of present-day developments. Within this context, it would also be futile to advocate that “small is beautiful” because often, and by closer scrutiny, it proves to be just the opposite.¹ Perhaps it is preferable to regard the existence of small states more empirically as a given fact of the international system, a reality that has a right to be perpetuated. But how can this right best be insured?

If a hypothesis is in order, it can be briefly stipulated that a small state can be secure today if it respects the rather stable polarization of the international system, if it devises means of getting along with its neighbors, and if it establishes a sound domestic base for counteracting threats from within. Whatever measurements we wish to apply, this remains a tall order.

The following analysis will take a macro approach, beginning with an initial assessment of certain preconditions confronting a small state in its search for survival. This leads to a review of five possible strategies, reaching the conclusion that a carefully selected synthesis of aspects of available strategies may be what is needed to assure co-existence.

I. Fact and Fiction in Threat/Size Proportionality

In essence, conflict situations are ever present, but are largely internally induced. To overcome these domestic uncertainties strategic visions must be formulated before strategic decisions are made. National security should be considered in absolute terms. These thoughts have application to any state regardless of size but have special meaning for countries judged to be small. Yet what is small?

Throughout history, man has been preoccupied with determining the ideal size of states. Aristotle tells us that “clearly then, the best limit of the population of a state is the largest number which suffices for the purpose of life, and can be taken in at a single view.”² Centuries and thousands of pages later, we have come to accept the fact that states are ephemeral creatures of history whose size is determined by their function to protect and to achieve social advantage.

In practical terms, smallness evades a realistic definition. Perhaps, for the purpose of this presentation, it would be acceptable to regard a small state as a “local power” whose demands are restricted to its own and adjacent areas. A small state is frequently judged to be a helpless pawn and has often become the object of international politics. On the other hand, it perceives itself as a virtuous and law abiding legal entity. Strangely, a state projects itself as small when it seeks to obtain beneficial external attention, whether in terms of assistance, aid or just sympathy. Yet the same state wishes to be considered as equal when asserting international status, diplomatic rights and sovereign influence. Consequently, being small seems to vary according to circumstances, and is psychologically preconditioned by a certain frame of mind.

Small State Vulnerability: The role of small states has changed over time and so has the means for their survival. Simply in terms of numbers — there are six times as many small states today as there were fifty years ago — small states today are more secure against great power intervention because of bloc representation in international fora and a greater awareness of events elsewhere in the world, because of more specifically delineated superpower interests, and because of the scale of sophisticated weapon systems spanning continents. Yet despite these ingredients for greater small state security, leaders of some of these nations act as if they were still living in a 19th century environment in which attacks by metropolitan powers were imminent in splendid isolation.

For hundreds of years, the general perception of a state's viability remained the same. Aristotle was satisfied if a state could be viewed at a single glance; Machiavelli emphasized sovereignty as residing in the prince who alone would be personally responsible for a state's survival; Rousseau idolized smallness as permitting direct democracy thus minimizing conflict, and even Masaryk, writing in 1915, still regarded the positive attributes of small nation-states as the use of individual talent, constructive interpersonal relations, and the maintenance of natural borders which could not easily give rise to competing claims.

Of course, these visionary assertions had little relation to reality when it came to strategic planning, as Napoleon I proved to his contemporaries. Yet it was particularly since World War II, when the number of countries and the technology of warfare drastically accelerated, that the role of small states was subjected to fundamental changes.³ Annette Baker Fox found in her seminal study of small powers during the 1939-45 European war that their alignment with larger states demonstrated

that it was more dangerous than being neutral; likewise, an alliance of small states was bound to fail because the sum total of their aggregate influence was still weakness. Paradoxically, the possibility of a two-way atomic war during the 1950s seemed to provide a greater freedom of maneuver for the smaller nations. But nuclear proliferation in the 1960s forced a reconsideration when supranationalism and various forms of federalism were regarded as a desirable solution for small state security.

The 1970s brought a further change as smaller states gained in economic leverage as well as in voting power. Organizational emphasis was placed on the creation of a third force whether in terms of non-alignment or that of a north-south dialogue. The present decade seems to reveal, once again, a greater fragmentation with stress upon national resilience, economic nationalism and competition. All of these various interpretations and arrangements have as their objective a reduction in national vulnerability. No perfect solution has yet been found, and a different structural configuration is surely to emerge during the 1990s.

One author, Leopold Kohr, even argues that the principal cause of our present difficulties is the unmanageable size of nations which, like overgrown organisms, can no longer provide all the services demanded and expected.⁴ This argument is not persuasive enough to lead to the breakup of large countries. The slogan that "there is no misery that cannot be solved on a small scale" remains just that, unrealistic and wishful thinking. Can a small country provide all services with limited resources? Do national problems today not become international problems? Is the multiplication of borders as a result of the existence of many small states not adding to potential conflict? Inevitably, when seeking to answer these

queries, we will reach the conclusion that strategies must focus on the future role of small states and not be based upon possibly misleading experiences of the past. The future role will be determined by finding a combination of forces that would make any threats to a small state too costly to be carried out.

The Limitations of Strategy: Before settling on an admittedly speculative perfect design for survival, it is important to acknowledge some restrictions to planning. A small state cannot afford to get involved in conflict. Consequently, the best strategies must deter rather than plan for victorious conquest. The approach cannot be purely military but needs to be multidimensional. Above all, a strategy for national security must receive highest priority. Regrettably, however, many states today do not live up to these expectations. They may have an economic planning unit but no national security agency; they may have a development strategy but no acclaimed strategy for national survival.

The absence of a strategy is often the direct consequence of an inability to define specific threats. Vaguely construed as military challenges, the optimism of politics refuses to accept a threat existence until it is evident through hostile action. It would be much more useful to perceive threats as any action or sequence of events which, in a broader sense, could drastically degrade the quality of life or significantly narrow the range of policy choices.⁵

In future, outright territorial competition appears to be diminishing as the concept of self determination gains in respectability. More likely are conflicts over resources that will tend to be militarily short engagements, disrupting the supply of essential commodities, and possibly changing local regimes through outside intervention. Conflicts of an ideological nature

will be of a prolonged duration. Historically and statistically, external conflicts originate predominantly in neighboring countries. Although this may still be relevant for the immediate future, it is useful to bear in mind that modern technology is progressively reducing the importance of propinquity as a necessary prerequisite for aggression.

Other basic considerations need to be kept in mind. Securing national objectives prescribes the use and development of all available powers. A strategy for policy implementation must first aim at a principal threat, with lesser material attention given to secondary vulnerabilities. More indeterminate threats require a conventional response. This need not be directed at the presumed source of the threat but can often take the form of indirect means, such as an alliance. A larger state has the advantage of an in-depth defense. A smaller state, lacking a physical superiority and an ability for flexible defense, has to rely on strategic insights, skills and tactics, to outwit an aggressor. Nevertheless, as Winston Churchill once reminded us, “no matter how involved a commander is with his own plans, every now and then he must think of the enemy.”

In other words, it is imperative that a government be as specific as it can possibly be when preparing to avert disaster. Otherwise, no power and no strategy will suffice to accomplish the objective of survival.

The Absolute Value of National Security: There is one last introductory thought. The priority of strategic planning must be commensurate with its value to the nation. Strategies must be influenced by a clear, well defined, and publicly enunciated vision which will unite the people behind a government policy. A shared perception will give a shared sense of direction; it

will create a broad enthusiasm and will multiply popular support.

The effect of such a national vision was demonstrated by President Kennedy's 1962 announcement that "we shall put a man on the moon within a decade." It was a distinct objective, specifying a manageable time frame. The impact of this declaration was electrifying: people were inspired by a visible goal; scientists and research institutions doubled their efforts; the mysteries of space invaded the classrooms of America, and business prepared for the commercial fallout of newly discovered materials. In the process, and satisfying the national rationale of the exercise, was the attempt to compete with the Russians in reaching the lunar surface.

Providing a carefully thought-out vision should be a cardinal task for government planners. Vague statements, ambiguous directives, or even secrecy about ultimate concerns will not do. Most governments have failed to create such a motivational challenge with the consequence that people remain uninspired and apathetic. Successful strategies are guided by visions of a goal that is to preserve national security.⁶ The value of security is a direct exponent of achievements to be protected and the number of threats to be guarded against. And here, some misconceptions prevail.

National security cannot only be a goal but it must also be a consequence defined by threats challenging a state. Threats are ever present if we realize that human conflicts do not arise as an irrational catastrophe but when the wrong thinking creates an intolerable situation. No governments are free of this human aberration although it is often only realized after policy mistakes have caused an antagonistic condition. This belated effect has

led to some overly optimistic assessments and, consequently, to some fallacious thinking.

We will all remember political leaders who, at some time and place in the recent past, have assured their citizens that no serious confrontation or crises are likely to affect their country over the next decade. Governmental operations and funding decisions are frequently based upon just such an assumption, leaving a country almost completely unprepared for any sudden change to the worse. Creation of stockpiles may have been postponed, acquisition of weapon systems delayed, necessary training deferred, and even alliance negotiations ruled out as not being of imminent usefulness. Such demonstration of official optimism encourages a reckless degree of complacency and a commitment to a status quo that is, to say the least, unwarranted.⁷ Looking for a “free ride” in matters of security is unrealistic and hardly in the national interest.

The problem is, of course, a too narrow definition of national security which emphasizes the military aspect. This creates a false public image and ignores other dangers. In future, national security will have to take the geostrategic environment into account. The consequences of space technology will diminish the importance of distance as an inhibiting factor to military discord. Small states need not necessarily be left behind in this emerging technological extravaganza. By using their political capabilities to the fullest for mobilizing all forms of power, including ideas, commerce and communications, they could magnify their leverage.

Now, should we place an absolute value on national security? We will recall that Thomas Hobbes advocated total submission to the needs of the state, making its survival a precondition for an individual's existence. Most citizens will

differ with this absolutist interpretation although they will be prepared, often reluctantly, to make certain sacrifices. Most of us will retain some reservations, balancing the demands of the state with personal values and choices, including the family, a desired standard of living, and even life itself. A government will have to adapt its demands to these personal reservations. National security may suffer in material terms but could benefit from a greater consensus.

It appears from these considerations that the size of a state has only limited bearing on its vulnerability. If threats are seen as an act limiting choice and the values of life, they can affect all nations on an increasing scale. Governments have hesitated, for various reasons, to evolve comprehensive strategies which could effectively deal with these broader challenges. Moreover, when money, men and weapons are in deficient supply, strategic thinking becomes imperative. Missing, in most cases, is a national vision to provide public impetus for action. As smaller states are beginning to contemplate their future, a number of strategic options are available to them. Let us, in turn, examine five strategic clusters.

II. Strategies in Equity – The Indivisibility of Sovereign Rights

One of the primary tools for guaranteeing the sanctity of a state's existence, and for assuring its freedom from external intervention, is the vague but generally respected concept of sovereignty. It entails rights as well as obligations but a number of smaller states prefer to insist upon the former while neglecting to abide by the latter. This has led to misunderstandings and added to the vulnerabilities. A small state would find a more appreciative world if it openly acknowledges its international responsibilities instead of seeking refuge, and special considerations, behind the collective description of the Third World.

Examples are frequent in which an uneven moral equity is balanced in favor of the small state. Diminutiveness appears to harbor its own forgiveness. Many a foreign leader has gone to New York or Washington and, by publicly recommending changes in American policy, thought to raise the international standing of his government at the expense of the United States. In January 1984, Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir told the Foreign Policy Association in Washington: "(The United States should) be more responsive to legitimate aspirations of the third world by...accepting a code of conduct." A few months earlier, Singapore's Foreign Minister Mr. Dhanabalan, talked to a New York audience about U.S.-Japan relations: "the only permanent solution is for the United States to adopt a policy of economic reform."⁸ Now these sentiments may very well be valid but should senior officials from either Washington or Moscow attempt to give similar public advice in Southeast Asian capitals, it would be decried as a blatant interference in internal affairs. There seems to be a subconscious acceptance

of a double standard. A politically effective concept of equity cannot condone random application.

No doubt, the world of tomorrow will give a greater credence to smaller states, especially within their own regional setting. The real capabilities of the great powers can be expected to be much more diffused economically as well as militarily. By conserving their scarce resources, their actions will tend to be issue- and situation-dependent. Consequently, it is likely that smaller states will pursue their own multidirectional interactions to a greater extent. At the same time, old alliances will become less cohesive. Greater unilateral action in world affairs will increase the complexity of relations — and the likelihood of conflict.

Measured by present standards of growth, it is quite conceivable that many small nations will no longer be economically destitute in another fifteen to twenty years. This could encourage different types of coalitions and different forms of cooperative patterns. Some already become apparent in the multiplication of north-south exchanges. Wealth will still be unevenly distributed but cross-regional arrangements could be stimulated, perhaps involving the newly industrializing countries. In any case, a more assertive self confidence can accelerate friction as well as the need for protection.

The Guarantees of the International System: Undiluted international respect for the principal of sovereignty constitutes the greatest nominal protection for the weak. For this reason, they will probably engage in any activity which seeks to uphold and strengthen respect for sovereignty whether it be in international fora, bilateral treaty obligations or in interstate mediation. In the international arena, acting on behalf of one's

government accords equal status but this equality is of a tenuous nature, more indulgent than legal.

To the extent that a state relinquishes a part of its sovereignty, it invites others to take advantage of it. Every signature to a treaty means sharing of sovereignty. Accepting a weighted vote or proportional representation in a regional organization further diminishes equal standing. Approval, even indirectly, of any of the whole range of sovereignty violations, from invasion to economic discrimination, can permit reciprocal treatment. Against this background of a diluted sovereignty, it can easily be imagined that the concept is today more fiction than reality. Seeking salvation in international law and order can be a futile act of desperation. Yet there are other potential dangers for a small state which is in the process of adjusting to the international system.

To mind comes a situation where a small state seeks to shift its interests and alignment in an unexpected way. By doing so, it could upset a precarious balance of power in a given region, thereby perhaps attaining temporary security but long term vulnerability. One can imagine a pilot fish which, trying to avoid being eaten, attaches itself closely to a shark. The Koreans have tried it, and so did Cuba, Taiwan and Vietnam, among others. The weakness of such an arrangement is that it can be summarily abrogated if it no longer serves the interest of the dominant party.

Can the adoption of neutrality provide a guarantee against insecurity? Only few, if any country can accept the total abstinence required by this status.⁹ As interdependence grows, neutrality for a single country becomes exceedingly difficult. Aspiring to a neutral standing can easily become a dream or a nightmare, but all the same, it remains an illusion. Today,