

Erwin A. Schmidl

Small States and International Operations

The following paper is about the role of ‘small states’ in international (peace) operations.¹ Not wanting to get lost in the quagmire of definitions what a ‘small’ state is, suffice it to say that ‘small states’ in this context refer to states other than the ‘Big Five’ (i.e. the five Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council), as long as they are not hegemonial powers themselves. Actually, it might be better to use Michael Handel’s concept of ‘weak states’ because the ‘smallness’ of many countries in question is defined by the size of their neighbours rather than their own: Canada is small vis-à-vis the United States, and so is Austria vis-à-vis Germany (and both suffer from their own inferiority syndromes), yet Canada is more than 100 times bigger than Austria (and, by the way, 30 times the size of Germany), with more than four times as many inhabitants. To quote Handel: ‘The weak and powerful states have many common characteristics and problems. Any attempt to separate out the weak states as a totally different “breed” is artificial. No state is all powerful and no state is completely weak.’²

Essentially, the role of smaller or weak states in international politics is limited: they execute rather than formulate policy. However, smaller states can serve important roles as transmitters or in getting processes starting and moving. On certain occasions and under the right circumstances, they might actually exercise a certain degree of influence, whether acting through international organisations or on a bilateral basis. During the Cold War, there were numerous examples for this ‘leverage of the weak’.³ It would be wrong to see smaller states as mere pawns in the big powers’ games.

These elementary principles also apply to the participation of smaller states in international peace missions and other crisis response operations. In the following, we shall examine several advantages and weaknesses of smaller states in such operations. Although some of these points refer to smaller states in general, there is a certain emphasis on European countries.

1. Advantages of smaller states:

- 1.1. Because of their structure – ‘small is beautiful’ – these countries are sometimes better organised, and benefit from the ‘everybody knows everybody’-syndrome. Being smaller, they tend to be more flexible.
- 1.2. Smaller countries are often forced to work with limited budgets. Therefore, personnel from a smaller country (military, police or civilian) are used to improvise, and trained to

1 As this study is a summary, references to sources are kept to a minimum. Readers are referred to my recent book, Erwin A. Schmidl (ed), *Peace Operations Between War and Peace* (Ilford, Essex: Frank Cass 2000), for more information on peace operations in general.

2 Micheal Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (1981, 2nd ed.: London: Frank Cass 1990), p. 257. He therefore prefers a continuum to a pyramid scenario when studying the international power hierarchy (ibid., p. 11).

3 For example, see now the case study on Austria, Gunter Bischof, *Austria in the First Cold War, 1945-55: The Leverage of the Weak* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1999).

think flexibly. This is an obvious requirement in peace operations ('corporal's wars') just as it used to be in earlier counter-insurgency campaigns.

- 1.3. Sometimes, the rosy image of smaller states can be useful. Not being much of a 'power', they invite less polarised reactions (to burn the flag of Luxembourg or Austria is less fun than burning the Stars & Stripes).
- 1.4. Because their involvement or interest in a certain conflict is less obvious, and their 'colonial' past is either forgotten or was truly minimal, they sometimes find it easier to act as 'honest brokers' and therefore can play a positive or even crucial role in negotiations (Sweden, Switzerland, but also Norway in the Middle East are good examples). As intermediaries, they risk less 'loss of face' than a larger power.
- 1.5. Usually suffering from inferiority syndromes vis-à-vis 'big brothers', smaller countries occasionally are tempted to 'show their mettle', trying to excel in peace operations (such was the case with the contingents from Botswana or Zimbabwe in Somalia in the early 1990s).

2. Possible disadvantages of smaller states:

- 2.1. Smaller states carry less weight – or 'punch' – in the international arena. They consequently find it harder to influence policy, and are sometimes kept out of decision-making processes which can make life more difficult for their troops.
- 2.2. Most peace operations entail – whether explicit or not – the threat of force. The 'guns behind the hill' usually are more credible in the case of major powers: an expeditionary force with contingents from, let us say, Austria, Lithuania, and Luxembourg alone is presumably less convincing.
- 2.3. Being small, these countries usually are only able to contribute limited contingents. This is a less serious problem in police or traditional peacekeeping missions where contingents usually are small and – in observer, police and civilian missions – operate in mixed teams anyway. In the context of more robust 'enforcement' operations, however, a single-national battalion or brigade will be better able to perform military tasks than a multi-national unit. In multi-national units, communications often suffer from different training and languages, sometimes leading to severe (and possibly fatal) misunderstandings. Preparing a multi-national contingent (like the Austrian-Hungarian-Slovene battalion presently deployed to Cyprus) usually requires at least twice the effort to achieve the same result.
This does not mean that contingents from smaller countries are less competent in their military skills. Quality of training, or the soldiers' mindset, usually have less to do with the size of the country in question than with training and arm of service: paratroopers, whether from the U.S., Canada, or the Netherlands, will require more mission-oriented re-training for a peacekeeping mission than their compatriots from civil affairs or military police.
- 2.4. Although it is difficult to generalise here, bigger countries usually enjoy the advantage of having better or more modern equipment available for their forces.
- 2.5. Because of their size, smaller countries might find it harder to bear casualties – the withdrawal of the Belgian contingent from Rwanda in 1994 after the murder of ten Belgian peacekeepers is an example. However, as the American reaction to the unsuccessful Ranger mission in Somalia a year earlier showed (most will still remember

the image of the mutilated ranger dragged through the streets of Mogadishu), even the U.S. are not exactly immune to the sight of body bags returning home: in general, western democracies appear more susceptible, regardless of their size.

- 2.6. Being small – or even formally ‘neutral’ – does not mean that a country acts impartially, or enjoys a neutral image. In the early stages of the Yugoslav war of succession, Austria certainly was not perceived as impartial, despite her small size or neutral status!
- 2.7. Because of their background (and lack of ‘back-up’), contingents from smaller countries are in general better suited for civilian, police, or limited military – esp. ‘specialist’ – tasks than for fighting units. This, however, just as their sometimes less aggressive image can be an advantage as well, dependent on the character of a particular mission.

Despite the problems listed, and mainly for political reasons, small states are often included in peace operations – partly because the presence of many contingents helps the ‘international’ image of these missions, and because it corresponds to the principle of (at least in theory) equality between the states as embodied in the UN Charter (‘one country – one vote’). It also meets the (usually erroneous) self-image of international organisations of being actors themselves rather than just a stage for the states to act on. And it fits the ambitions of smaller countries ‘to play a role, too’ (the ‘we-too’ phenomenon).

Some smaller countries (especially the European neutrals and others) have gained a remarkable reputation as peacekeepers in the past. This was not always so: in earlier peace operations (such as Crete in 1897 or Albania in 1913), smaller countries (Montenegro and the Netherlands) contributed police while the military forces came from the Powers. Only in the inter-war years, smaller countries started to participate in these missions (such as the League’s Saarland operation of 1935), and this development continued after the Second World War, certainly helped by the creation of the United Nations Organization and the Cold War which often led to reduced or limited involvement of the ‘Big Five’ in peacekeeping missions. From this came the idea that smaller countries might actually be better peacekeepers – a reputation which was not surprisingly well liked by their politicians and public relations people. Austria, Ireland, Sweden or Denmark, to name just a few, are indeed held in high regard as peacekeepers – not because of their smallness but rather due to the professional qualities which their soldiers, police and civilian personnel contribute to these missions, including, as said before, the ability to improvise. But while they are good in the field, and while specialists from these countries might even reach top positions, their role will always remain a secondary one to the major powers. It’s always the latter which dictate the political tune in the Security Council (not to mention ersatz bodies, such as the North Atlantic Council in the case of Operation ‘Allied Force’, the 1999 air campaign against Yugoslavia), and their interests determine whether a particular operation takes place at all.

It would be unrealistic to talk about the role of smaller states without taking into account their position within existing alliances or organisations. These also influence their political role, even though most countries appear to take part in these missions – whether under UN, NATO or whatever umbrella – regardless of their affiliations. Belonging to a strong alliance might actually help to overcome some of the smaller countries’ inherent weaknesses listed above. In recent operations, members of NATO certainly profited in several ways. For example, in NATO-organised missions, non-members are not eligible for command positions (in 1996-99, the Austrians contributed the majority of the mixed logistic unit – BELUGA, later HELBA – in IFOR/SFOR, but command of this unit rotated among NATO members only). Also, recent studies from former Yugoslavia suggest that the background of joint training and common doctrines enjoyed by NATO members actually helps them to achieve better co-operation and performance in peace operations, too.

From this, one could conclude that even in peace operations, members of strong alliances enjoy advantages over other 'small states' – or, to re-phrase an Austrian poster slogan from years ago: 'I am small, you are small – why do they respect you more?'