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Introductory Comments on the Objective of the Small States and Alliances Workshop

In his introduction Heinz Gaertner mentions the questions and arguments on which the articles of this volume are based. Let me offer a few comments on some of these ideas – not on the theories about why and when alliances are formed, how they work, and why they dissolve or, against the rules, do not dissolve but survive – even after their original rationale has evaporated – and take on more tasks, enlarge and play a comprehensive role for security, as NATO does, but I will rather concentrate on the question if small states should join alliances or not.

I will avoid going into these theoretical questions because it is very easy – at least in many cases – to answer such theoretical questions very clearly in a more pragmatic way.

This is also my approach in dealing with the special questions in respect to small states and alliances. I will first concentrate on some specific arguments and thoughts regarding the question if small states need membership in alliances, second on the question if small states can rely on alliances, and third on the main question: Can small states still pursue their security interests within an alliance?

In this context, some of the questions raised in Heinz Gaertner's introduction are:

- Why do small states join an alliance and can they even become an integral part of an alliance?
- Does the decision for small states to join alliances depend – or should it depend – on the judgement whether the overall benefits of doing so are greater than the costs, or, respectively, does the perceived threat warrant the costs?
- Could the money necessary to cover the costs that membership in an alliance causes be better spent by staying alone?
- Does the increased security resulting from the partner's commitment outweigh the loss of autonomy, as "sacrificed" in the commitment to the partner?
- Under what conditions and when does a small state need the enhanced deterrence of attack on itself and the enhanced defense capability?
- Is alliance membership worth accepting the risk of having to come to the aid of an ally when one would have preferred not to do so in the absence of commitment?

I will try to give a few answers which indeed do not provide a comprehensive representation, but nevertheless show a positive alternative based on observation and practical experience:

Small states join an alliance because they "take refuge" in alliances to be safe from big states.

The judgement on costs – does the threat situation justify the costs of alliance membership or the benefits from the alliance, or, respectively, could the funds required for alliance membership not be better spent staying alone – is not totally conclusive.

What costs arise from alliance membership? Many people in Austria believe that one needs to develop strong armed forces only when joining an alliance. This can be explained by recalling that during the Cold War Austria was, in regard to security policy, "riding along" on

the deterrence of NATO, and, therefore, the conviction prevails that one does not need a substantial military oneself. The Alliance survived, thank God – even though without us. The lesson to be learned from the Austrian experience would, therefore, be: there must be alliances which have a protection function, or, respectively, a deterrence function vis-à-vis aggressors, but do not participate in them. However, if many or all states think like that, there is no alliance or, at least, it is much weaker.

With regard to NATO, all European countries feel that, with respect to costs, their own military expenditure was lower due to membership in the alliance than it would have been otherwise.

Is giving up autonomy in security policy by joining an alliance compensated by the benefit gained by the partner's commitment? The answer to this is a counter question:

What autonomy does a small state have in reality today?

In reality states like Austria or Switzerland have no capabilities of their own for designing and shaping security policy. By themselves, they also do not have sufficient defense capabilities because they cannot keep pace with the evolution of modern, up-to-date warfare.

Does a small state need the security guarantees or the higher deterrence capability of an alliance at all, or, respectively, is it not drawn into possible war by being a member of the alliance?

This is, of course, quite dependent on the purpose of the alliance and on the situation. Let us take so-called "old" NATO as an example: NATO deterred the Soviet Union, both from a big war as well as from occupying additional individual countries. However, had there been a war, Austria, for instance, would not have been spared – we know this sufficiently well by today. Contrary to many speculations, Austria should not have counted on substantial support by NATO, that is, limiting danger for Austria would have been very low on NATO's priority list and Austria's territory would inevitably have been a target area for NATO nuclear weapons.

This question can therefore hardly be answered theoretically, or, respectively, can only be answered in such a complex and conditional way, that no useful conclusion can be arrived at. Therefore, the question is to be answered pragmatically on a case by case basis.

The question whether small states can be confident that the system would come to their aid in the eventuality of aggression from outside – or not, because great powers might consider such a threat not worthy of collective action, – and, on the other hand, the possibility small states might find themselves committed to participate in a conflict in which they had not direct interest – to be drawn unwillingly into the wars of big states, represent the risk of being "entrapped" or "abandoned". The strategy to escape this trap is – as mentioned in the introduction – to adopt "neutrality" or "hide".

I believe that the question of keeping alliance commitments cannot be dealt with under this aspect only. It is not only feasible that a great power does not conduct a war for the protection of an allied small state but it is just as feasible, vice versa, that the small state walks away quietly and tries to make its own arrangements. Even a great power needs to ask the question whether it is worth admitting a possibly incalculable, unreliable small state, which, under the at least presumed protection of the alliance, rattles its sabers, provokes, and draws the big state into an unwanted conflict. It happened before that allies changed sides just before a war, and it happened very often that they changed sides in the course of a war.

There are no absolute security guarantees. Security policy has the objective to reduce threats, if possible, to eliminate them, and to make dangers calculable and to prepare for them.

Alliances can also only be judged in this respect, namely, whether they can enhance the probability for improving the security situation based on circumstances, etc. The ambitious demands resulting from the theoretical considerations, however, do not light up a fire in the dark but only demonstrate what is certain in any case: namely, that in the end everything is uncertain.

This also applies to the presumed escape from the risk “abandonment“ or “entrapment“, namely neutrality or hiding. The success of either one is uncertain – as history has shown.

What I mean is that most of the problems I mentioned before are not problems specific for small states. They are the typical problems arising when dealing with the question if a state should join an alliance or not, but to that extent, they are always the problems for the small states.

The central question – as mentioned in the introduction – is:

Can small states still pursue their own security interest within an alliance and what influence do small states have within alliances?

However the real question that needs to be asked is:

How, in general, can small states pursue their own, objective security interests? And what influence do so-called “normal“ states (not rogue states or states with adventurous leaders and dictators) have in general in respect to creating a security architecture, in order to influence their political environment?

I would say that a small state in Europe has no influence worth mentioning in this respect. And pursuing one’s own security interest can today not be seen any longer nationally but only from a regional and global viewpoint. The principal interest of the European small states must, therefore, be to give stability to Europe, to enlarge the stable, peaceful area, and to contribute to security measures such as crisis management and conflict solution, in the event stability is endangered.

One small state alone cannot contribute anything.

These thoughts are meant to stimulate discussion and also intended to include some pragmatic considerations without making the theoretical considerations disappear. But, in summarizing, let me conclude:

- The question whether small states should join alliances or not is both sustainable and unsustainable in theory.
- The question whether a specific small state should be a member of an alliance, cannot be answered, however, by theory, but can only be answered on the basis of concrete circumstances, in particular, its objective comprehensible interests in the specific situation and the foreseeable development of the security policy environment.