Small, Smart and Salient? Rethinking Identity in the Small States Literature

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Small, Smart and Salient? Rethinking Identity in the Small States Literature

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Abstract  The article adopts a critical perspective on the generally negative view in mainstream and cognitivist understandings of the power of small states and introduces a discursive approach. This focuses on how ‘smallness’ can also be told in more positive ways in the construction of state identities. Looking at the case of Finland, it is shown how smallness has been told differently at different times with specific implications flowing from these different readings as to the possibilities for action in foreign policy. More particularly, it is argued that smallness is being replaced by the marker of being smart and innovative, with some Finnish politicians arguing that in the current post-Cold-War world the framework of big–small is increasingly less relevant.

Introduction

In the international relations literature and in world politics size has generally been connected to capability and influence. Whilst being big is correlated with power, being small has been viewed as a handicap to state action, and even state survival. In many discourses and debates, small states are frequently ignored, the view being that ultimately they have to go along with the frames dictated by larger, more powerful states. The focus on the positions of the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany in recent debates on the state of the transatlantic relationship is indicative of this. In this context, the positions of Europe’s smaller states have characteristically been ignored. Instead of being understood to have constitutive power to also impact on the evolution of transatlantic relations, Europe’s small states have frequently been depicted as if the only freedom available to them was to choose between membership in either ‘new’ or ‘old’ Europe.

Bearing this in mind, this article does two things. First, it critically reviews the mainstream literature on small states and its tendency to equate ‘smallness’ with a lack of power. Adopting a constructivist perspective, the article focuses on how ‘smallness’ can be constructed differently in different identity narratives, with different narratives in turn entailing different implications for state action. In more normative terms it is argued that, material constraints aside, considerable

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resources can exist in playing on a ‘small state’ identity. As such, smallness should not always be conceptualised as a negative attribute of weakness. This is illustrated through a case study of Finland from the Cold War onwards, the aim being to show how the idea of Finland as a ‘small state’ has been told differently at different times, with this impacting on what is perceived as possible in international affairs. In particular, it is shown how positive readings of Finland’s ‘small state’ identity have been utilised as a resource to reshape the strategic environment more to Finland’s preferences. Second, through the case study it is argued that in a European context the focus on size may increasingly be missing the point. In contrast, pertinent identity narratives in Finland have begun to meld with (or even replace) a concern with size, with a growing focus on being ‘smart’ or ‘innovative’ becoming increasingly important instead.

Small States and Power

Before reviewing how traditional realist, liberalist and cognitive approaches have thought about small states’ power and their capacity for action, it should first be noted that definitions of what counts as a ‘small state’ are notoriously difficult. Attempts to formulate ‘objective’ markers of smallness by referring to things like the absolute size of a country’s resources, whether in terms of territory, population, size of gross domestic product (GDP), military capacity, etc, have been common (Thorhallsson 2006, 8–14; Crowards 2002). Thus, regarding Europe, the threshold of smallness has often been set at the population of the Netherlands (16 million) (Neumann and Gsto¨ hl, forthcoming; Thorhallsson 2006, 10). However, such ‘absolute/objective’ definitions are arbitrary and it is uncertain what they tell us about state behaviour (Joenniemi 1998, 62).

Realist/Neorealist Perspectives

Consequently, it has become more common to define small states in relative terms. For (neo)realists, the measure of smallness is power, defined as a state’s ability to influence outcomes. The units of power in realist/neorealist theories are understood as materially measurable, whether in terms of numbers of guns, planes, soldiers or size of GDP. By defining small states as those with a relatively small amount of power, ‘small’ becomes synonymous with ‘weak’. Consequently, the freedom of action of small states is usually presented as dependent on the benevolence of larger powers, the relationships between them, or the nature of the balance of power (whether conservative or competitive), whilst being small is considered to entail a security problem (Vital 1971, 8–9; Keohane 1969, 299; Knudsen 2002, 184, 187).

In the anarchic self-help international system characterised by states’ unregulated use of power, neorealists argue it is the particular distribution of power (material resources) across the system (the balance of power) which is taken to frame what is considered rational action for small states. Changes in the balance of power between the great powers are taken to determine the policies which small states will (or at least should) adopt. Such accounts present small states as isolated variables in a sea of anarchy, being buffeted by the powerful waves of others’ actions. Indeed, (neo)realists assume that as a result of their lack
of power small states must be more preoccupied with survival than great powers. Consequently, it is also assumed that whilst domestic factors may play a role in shaping great powers’ foreign policies, small states lack this luxury, since they feel the effects of anarchy more presciently. As such, their attention must always be directed to responding to the dictates of the international system, rather than the vagaries of domestic politics.  

However, if neorealists agree that fluctuations within the balance of power create a logic of rational action for small states in an anarchic world, little agreement exists over what such rational and logical action entails in practice—thereby indicating that the ‘imperatives’ of structural change are not obvious after all. Typically, neorealist accounts simplify small-state behaviour to one of two contradictory positions. On the one hand, it is argued that small states characteristically adopt balancing behaviour to equalise structural shifts in the balance of power between the great powers (Labs 1992). In contrast, others argue small states favour ‘anti-balance of power behaviour’, or what Stephen Walt terms ‘bandwagonning’— in which small-state behaviour is characterised by compliance with the demands of the more powerful party (Walt 1987, 29; Fox 1959).

More subtly, others have included geopolitical factors in their predictions of small-state behaviour, believing that broad accounts of bandwagonning versus balancing are too generalised. For example, Hans Mouritzen (1994, 158; 1991, 218) argues that what counts is the ‘constellation the weak power belongs to, being understood as its basic set of relationships to the strong powers in its salient environment’ (emphases added). A weak state may be aligned to one of the poles, it may be the satellite of a great power, it may be symmetrically positioned between the great powers or it may be in an adaptive acquiescence constellation (Mouritzen 1994, 158). Mouritzen (1991, 218) argues that being positioned in different geopolitical constellations significantly affects small-state behaviour. The task is therefore to illustrate how ‘weak powers in different constellations are affected differently by the same set of systemic (environmental) events or trends’.

Mouritzen argues that states in an adaptive acquiescence constellation with a particular great power (like Finland during the Cold War with the Soviet Union [1991; 1994] or subsequently with the European Union [1993]) tend towards bandwagonning behaviour. Being ‘unilaterally dependent, politically, upon one particularly strong power in its salient environment’ (Mouritzen 1991, 218), such states must avoid agitating the salient great power. By contrast, small states in an alliance constellation will usually opt for balancing behaviour, whilst small states in a satellite constellation are considered to have virtually no freedom of action whatsoever (Mouritzen 1994, 159). States in a symmetrical constellation have more room for manoeuvre; a fact that Mouritzen (1991, 225–226) argues explains Sweden’s more vocal foreign policy during the Cold War in comparison with Finland’s.

Ultimately, however, and despite their differences, neorealist approaches share a number of central assumptions and are susceptible to the same criticisms. Not least, understood as like units, such approaches ultimately treat small states as objects of international relations, rather than subjects. Their foreign policies are taken to be reflexive of fluctuations in the balance of power, with small states only capable of

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responding to events rather than being able to shape them. In this world, the intersubjective understandings of foreign policy-makers are treated as irrelevant.

Rather than being treated individually, small states are classified as a single category with their interests (and identities) attributed to them in relation to a theoretical understanding of the logic of anarchy and the balance of power. So for Finland, we could substitute any small state, and once we knew the context of the balance of power and the ‘laws’ of rational action entailed therein, the assumption is that we could reliably predict the response of each to any given situation, since it is predicted all would (or at least ‘should’) respond similarly. Taking state interests as identical, these approaches exclude the possibility that the particular culture or history of individual states, and concepts of self and others deriving from that, are important in the foreign policy-making process (Ruggie 1998, 863). The assumption is that ‘domestic politics can be “black boxed”, because, whatever their different internal characteristics, all the states must nevertheless act in similar ways to ensure their security in a self-help world’ (Elman 1995, 174–175).

The need to take account of such concerns becomes apparent, however, in that, whilst Mouritzen provides a fourfold geopolitical classification of the position of small states in the balance of power, he cannot explain why a state may find itself in one constellation rather than another. Arguably, this is not reducible to an analysis of the requirements of the balance of power, but requires an understanding of history and identity politics.

**Liberal Perspectives**

Turning to liberal perspectives, Iver Neumann and Sieglinde Gstöhl (forthcoming) also note that neorealist approaches ultimately assume that states with powerful capabilities are prone to use them and generally feel unconstrained by a sense of responsibility for the international system or international norms of appropriate behaviour. This view, they note, is evident in Robert Kagan’s recent claim that differences in US and EU approaches to international affairs are simply a function of their different power capabilities.

In the context of security communities like the EU, where the realist power game has been consciously suspended in favour of a dense network of norms of acceptable behaviour, this view is problematic. As a result of the constraining impact of norms on the great powers, it is argued that small states tend to be strong supporters of international institutions, not least because they are seen to provide small states with opportunities for manoeuvre and influence (Rothstein cited in Keohane 1969, 294–295; Wivel 2002; 2005, 395). Thus, from a more liberal institutionalist perspective, the position of small states seems different. Once matters of norms of acceptable behaviour, and the idea that states are not always preoccupied with relative over absolute gains, are included, a more differentiated approach to small states and power becomes possible. As Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye have argued, in reality questions of smallness and greatness are often issue specific such that a small state in one sphere may be a great power possessing considerable influence in a different context. Examples include Switzerland (global finance) and Saudi Arabia (oil) (Neumann and Gstöhl, forthcoming).

This notion that small powers may also have capacities to influence has promoted research into precisely how. Subsequent analyses have focused on such things as opportunities provided by the (changing) structure of the international
system, a state’s particular geopolitical location, its resources or reputation, the actual state of the international system, and states’ abilities to utilise international norms to their own benefit (Neumann and Gstöhl, forthcoming). In this respect, Christine Ingebritsen (2002) has shown how the Nordic states have acted as ‘norm entrepreneurs’, trying to gain support for particular standards of appropriateness at the international level to mould the international environment to their concerns (also see Keohane 1969, 296).

From a Cognitivist to a Discursive Approach

Whilst the above approaches focus on rationalist and materialist factors in defining small states and trying to account for their behaviour, cognitivist analyses highlight how defining small states is as much about (self-)perception as absolute or relative definitions. According to Keohane (1969, 296), therefore, ‘a small power is a state whose leaders consider that it can never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system’. Similarly, David Vital (1967, 33) contends that weakness is ‘the most common, natural and pervasive view of self in the small state’, while Robert Rothstein (1968, 29) argues ‘a Small Power is a state which recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities, and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions, processes, or developments to do so’.

However, although these quotes highlight the importance of perception they also illustrate a tendency to equate a small-state identity with a particular mentality and set of preferences. Smallness, here, is read negatively as entailing limited power. Likewise, Anders Wivel (2002) contends that small states prioritise avoiding uncertainty and generally view a changing international system as a source of danger lacking opportunities. This is because great powers may utilise a period of transformation to enhance their ‘sphere of influence, cooperate with other states in a great power concert or even make a bid for regional hegemony’, all of which will have negative consequences for small states.

Contra Wivel, however, examples exist of small states capitalising on the changing structure of the international system to assert their preferences, whilst it is the great powers that might suffer from the uncertainties of change. A good example is the end of the Cold War, which (self-perceived) small states in Eastern Europe saw as an opportunity to radically reorient their foreign policies and establish a discursive framework of ‘returning to Europe’ which the West felt obliged to support. Indeed, Peter Katzenstein (1985) argues that adaptability is a prerequisite for small states heavily reliant on external markets to be successful, whilst great powers able to protect themselves from global pressures may find change more problematic.

The problem with such views is arguably the preoccupation with drawing out generalised patterns of behaviour, which ultimately means the specifics guiding action in particular cases are lost. In contrast, this paper adopts a discursive approach to the question of small-state identity which highlights the contingency entailed in telling identity narratives, thereby leaving open the possibility that smallness can be told more positively than Keohane indicates. Thus, states may in fact ‘choose’ to define themselves as small precisely as a strategy of gaining more influence over their environment.

Put otherwise, cognitivist understandings like Keohane’s remain stuck in a particular (realist?) logic that views power in absolute terms and neglects the
discursive resources that may derive from how smallness is defined in particular contexts. Instead of seeing a small-state identity as paralysing, more positive readings of smallness may create opportunities for action and innovation. In short, smallness may be retold precisely as a resource. As Nina Græger, Henrik Larsen and Hanna Ojanen (2002, 221) note, small states are often seen to have more international credibility, being understood ‘as having fewer hidden agendas and less ambitious national interests than more powerful states’. Likewise, small states are often presented as more peaceful and altruistic than larger powers; whilst emphasising one’s smallness can be a way to create space for action by indicating that the state in question poses no threat.

Focusing on the meanings attached to ‘smallness’ in constructing particular state identities entails a fundamental shift away from the positivist approaches outlined above. The point is not simply to argue about whether smallness should be seen as a positive or negative attribute, but to step outside this positivist framework and adopt a more interpretivist methodology where it is actors’ understandings that become the focus of attention. The rest of the article relies on the view that concepts such as ‘smallness’ and of being a ‘small state’ can be narrated in different ways. A small-state identity need not always be equated with weakness and limited capacities of action. However, if dominant narratives do operate this way then this will affect how state interests and possibilities for action are conceived. In contrast, more positive renderings of smallness in constructing state identities will entail broader possibilities for foreign policies.3 To illustrate these points the following two sections provide a case study of Finland from the Cold War onwards and demonstrate how the discursive construction of Finland as a ‘small state’ has changed across time, with different implications for the conduct of Finnish foreign policy.4

Cold War Finland: From Small-State Pragmatism to Nordic Activism

In many respects Finland is an archetypal small state. It has a small population (5.2 million), limited military capability and limited resources. Geographically, though, it is one of Europe’s largest countries and might be considered a great power in telecommunications and the paper industry. However, for most people, Finland is an archetypal small state, whilst its geopolitical position next to Russia/Soviet Union has seemed precarious.

During the Cold War, the West considered Finland as in constant peril of being subsumed within the Soviet bloc, and many were puzzled how Finland retained its independence and sovereignty next to the ‘expansionist’ Soviet Union. Some

3 This relies on a ‘performative’ understanding of language. Instead of seeing language as neutral and referring to a world ‘out there’, the language we use is constitutive of the world we see. Beyond this fundamental constructivist insight, however, representations of identity ‘do not [just] state a point of view or report on a reality, but constitute a certain kind of conduct’ (Butler 1997, 17–18). Thus, if smallness is told negatively or positively a state’s foreign policy is likely to become performative of the corresponding narrative. On such understandings of language, identity and action, see also Mark Laffey (2000).

4 Teija Tiilikainen (2006) has also recently analysed how a ‘small state identity’ has impacted on Finnish EU policy. Arguably, however, her analysis operates with a rather fixed notion of smallness, with constructivist/discursive notions of smallness becoming entangled with more objectivist assertions about size.
argued Finnish independence was illusory; that as a result of the 1948 Finnish–Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, Finland was subordinated to its eastern neighbour, a view popularised by the negative concept of ‘Finlandisation’. Alternatively, Finland’s survival as an independent state was attributed to the sagacity of its post-war leaders (particularly Presidents Juho Paasikivi and Urho Kekkonen), who are credited with having correctly perceived the (realist) reality of international politics and, more specifically, Finland’s precarious position as a small weak state in the shadow of the Soviet great power. Given the realities of the situation, Finland’s Cold War neutrality and policy of maintaining friendly relations with the Soviet Union were presented as having been the only way of preserving Finland’s sovereignty (for example, Lukacs 1992).

Interesting, here, is not which interpretation is correct, but rather how an understanding and identity of Finland as a small state was variously constructed throughout the Cold War, and the implications that particular understandings had for Finnish foreign policy. Importantly a small-state identity is not somehow ‘natural’ for Finland. For example, throughout the inter-war period, an expansionist discourse promoting the creation of Greater Finland was important in nationalist ideas. Finns were seen to possess a civilising mission to liberate their oppressed national kin beyond Finland’s borders in Russian Karelia, Estonia, Western Bothnia (Sweden) and Finnmark (Norway). During the Continuation War (1941–1944) with the Soviet Union, these ideas received pregnant expression as the Finns initially pushed the Soviet army back and set about a systematic programme of establishing Greater Finland in Karelia (see Browning 2003).

Of course, ideas of Finland as a small state also existed in inter-war Finland. Having only gained independence from the Russian Empire in 1917 it is unsurprising that Finnish identity was generally constructed in relation to the imperial neighbour. Indeed, the idea of Finland as ‘small’ has primarily been related to the ‘large’ eastern neighbour, which has been constructed as both benevolent and threatening. Similarly, whilst ideas of Greater Finland were important in the Continuation War, a dominant representation in the preceding Winter War (1939–1940) was of Finland as heroic David fighting the bully Goliath (Julkunen 1984, 130). Key, however, is that for many inter-war Finns Finland was not so much a small state as a great power in the making.

**Post-war Reappraisal**

Having lost the war, however, Finland’s government, led by President Paasikivi (1946–1956), set about fundamentally rethinking Finnish foreign policy and the national project. Instead of emphasising an expansionist ideology and inter-war nationalist ideas that the national mission required standing as the ‘outpost of the West’ against (evil) communist Russia, Paasikivi began constructing Finnish national identity and foreign policy by emphasising Finland as a ‘small state located next to a great power’. There were two key elements of Finland’s/Paasikivi’s post-war reappraisal. First, Paasikivi argued that in the inter-war period the Finns had behaved emotionally. Inter-war Russophobia had resulted in national recklessness (Pajunen 1968, 76) and an inability to correctly understand Soviet intentions towards Finland, which Paasikivi argued were strategic and defensive, not ideological and expansionist (Paasikivi 1956, 35–36). Moreover,
Russophobia meant the Soviet leadership had little trust in Finland’s proclaimed policy of neutrality from 1935 onwards (Kekkonen 1970, 110).

Second, Paasikivi argued the Finns were naive in failing to understand the nature of international politics. There were two elements to this. First, Paasikivi (1956, 9; Kekkonen 1970, 28) emphasised that the war had proved that Finland was a small state with a great power neighbour. Second, he criticised the Finns for believing in the authority of international law over the dictates of power politics: ‘Here the Finnish nation’s trust in right—like that of most small nations—showed some naivety or rather some unfamiliarity with the real world’ (Paasikivi 1958, 99, 16). Likewise, he complained that ‘we did not understand the way in which a Great Power looks at things and feels about small nations’ (Paasikivi 1958, 99). Whilst he asserted that the Soviet Union only had defensive interests in requesting Finnish territory at the end of the 1930s, the ‘logic’ of being a great power meant it could not stand for those interests being thwarted by a small state. Considering that the Finns were ‘guilty of intransigence’ (Puntila 1974, 164), he contended it was understandable, even legitimate, that as a great power the Soviet Union should resort to military measures (Paasikivi 1956, 36).

Paasikivi accepted a Machiavellian understanding of international politics. In Paasikivi’s worldview ‘the big powers ruthlessly pursued their own security interests … [whilst] … smaller powers could survive only if they correctly perceived the main currents of high politics and cleverly adapted themselves to realities determined by external forces’ (Apunen 1984, 27). If international relations are dominated by considerations of power, then smaller powers have less claim to sovereignty than larger powers and consequently should accept limitations of and infringements on their sovereignty imposed by great powers (Tiilikainen 1998, 141). As Paasikivi (1985, 592) emphasised, great powers are ‘subjects of politics’, small states its ‘objects’. Freedom to act is within structural bounds: prudent leaders would adjust themselves ‘to the political conditions laid down by the Great Powers’ (Tiilikainen 1998, 153). Once the realpolitik view was accepted, a realist reading of ‘smallness’ became an essential aspect of the Finnish self-image propagated by the reappraisal.

Paasikivi’s (neo)realist reading of international politics and his identification of Finland as a small state next to a great power had implications for foreign policy. Finland was understood as largely passive in the international system and unable to have a broader impact beyond its immediate environment. As a small state next to a great power, Finland’s best chance was to accept the realities of its geopolitical position, expunge previous conceptualisations of the Russians as the hereditary enemy and rebuild Finnish national identity on a less antagonistic basis to enable the country to earn the Soviet Union’s trust and friendship. Finland’s subsequent passive neutrality policy was therefore understood as a way to isolate the country from the Cold War and to persuade the Soviet Union that they had no reason to worry about Finland.

Particularly telling of this view was that Finnish politicians and historians explained Finland’s fight alongside Nazi Germany in the Continuation War by likening Finland to a piece of driftwood caught in the currents of great power politics (between Germany and the Soviet Union) (Upton 1999, 159). The imagery was designed to show the powerlessness of small states in a realpolitik world,
whilst also eliciting sympathy and understanding for Finland’s position in the West.\(^5\) Finland was presented as a victim of power politics (in both the past and present), whilst simultaneously responsibility for the war was shifted onto the Soviet Union and Germany. In this narrative, being small became paralysing for Finland on the international stage, though emphasising smallness was also a way to gain understanding, to present Finland as harmless and to keep the great powers at a distance.

Towards Small-State Activism

From the mid-1950s, however, Finnish neutrality became more active as the country’s small-state identity, especially when coupled with discourses of Nordicity, was re-evaluated as a possible resource (rather than a restriction) that would enable more active engagement in world politics.

Important in opening space for rethinking Finland’s role and reconceptualising smallness was Stalin’s death in 1953. Under Stalin the Soviet Union had been suspicious of any Finnish activism, particularly regarding attempts to develop inter-Nordic cooperation. In Moscow, various Nordic projects were viewed as pro-Western in orientation (Penttilä 1991, 42–43). This explains why Finland declined membership when the Nordic Council was established in 1952. After Stalin, a new attitude to international politics emerged in the Soviet leadership. In place of the perception that the world was irrevocably divided between constantly warring camps of capitalism and communism, which left little space for neutrality, possibilities of peaceful coexistence were acknowledged. In this light, neutrality and the Nordic project became seen more positively and this opened space for rethinking Soviet policies towards Finland (Berner 1986, 82–83). Particularly important was their acceptance in 1955 of Finland’s membership in the Nordic Council and the United Nations.

Under the guidance of President Kekkonen (1956–1981), a more activist approach to foreign policy developed. Central was that Finland’s geopolitical position between East and West was re-evaluated. Instead of limiting its scope for action, increasingly Finland’s geopolitical position was reconceptualised as a resource, in particular to enable the country to play the role of an arbiter and bridge-builder between East and West (Tiilikainen 1998, 155). Being ‘small’ and ‘neutral’ was no longer seen to require withdrawing from the world, but reinterpreted as suitable means for participation in it (Apunen 1975, 46). Such views underlay Kekkonen’s (1970, 94) 1961 announcement to the UN that Finland’s international role was that of a physician aiming to ‘diagnose and to try to cure’. This view was important in Finland’s sponsorship of the process behind the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and in Kekkonen’s promotion of a Nordic Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (NWFZ) in the region.

To some extent Finland (and the Nordic states generally) became conceptualised as a meeting place where Eastern socialism and Western

\(^5\) One retort against accusations of Finlandisation was precisely that, Finland being a ‘small state’ next to a great power, Finnish appeasement of Soviet wishes was the ‘only’ rational and pragmatic option. As one senior Finnish diplomat put it, Finnish neutrality ‘is designed to meet the realities of power, rather than the precepts of international law’ (Jakobson 1968, 49).
capitalism had been successfully ameliorated, thereby indicating that coexistence was possible (Hanhimäki 1997, xii). Whilst accepting the ‘reality’ of the Cold War situation in the North, the Nordic states also tried to temper that reality (Jones 2004). In Ingebritsen’s terms, they acted as ‘norm entrepreneurs’, throughout the Cold War promoting alternative ideas of security outside the traditional zero-sum frame of realism. However, they also promoted ideas of internationalism, solidarity with the Third World and environmentalism, whilst through their significant engagement in UN peacekeeping operations they carved out an identity for themselves as somewhat exceptional, as representing an alternative vision of world order and as such as being somewhat ‘better than the rest’ (Wæver 1992; Mouritzen 1995).

Finland’s small-state identity was therefore conceptualised differently than before. Being small, being located between East and West, was seen to entail particular resources and advantages, and (with their Nordic brothers) the Finns tried to claim the moral high ground, to act as international bridge-builders and to present themselves as a model of an alternative international order that rejected the brute pursuit of power in favour of a morally superior agenda built around ideas of internationalist solidarism and a modern and economically dynamic welfare state. Here, being small became a claim to morality, legitimacy and having a right to speak out on international issues (Browning, forthcoming).

Post-Cold War Finland: from Small to Smart

In the post-Cold-War period the idea that small states can make a valuable contribution to international politics has further developed in Finland. This has been accompanied by a melioration of Cold War realist readings of Finland’s small-state identity in favour of more liberalist-inspired ones, whilst more recently, it will be argued, small-state frames have been challenged by other discourses that largely ignore issues of size and locate Finland instead in terms of its ability to adapt to a globalising world. In both cases, this has been paralleled by a discursive shift in Finland (and Europe in general) from a ‘big-state/small-state’ dichotomy to questions of whether one is ‘at the core or in the periphery’. Here, being peripheral has usually been depicted as lacking power and therefore to be replaced by a position at the core. However, in more recent ‘globalising discourses’, even a focus on the core has been rejected.6

During the Cold War there were two cores (poles) in Europe. After 1989–1991 the European order became constituted by one core (EU) and many peripheries. Wivel (2002) argues that for small states this situation produced a double-edged sword. The advantage of the new order was that it minimised the risk of small states becoming embroiled in a war between the great powers. However, it also reduced the strategic options available to them. ‘Now there was only one strategic option: Membership of the European integration project.’ Whilst this view glosses over the complexities of the early 1990s, in Finland (as throughout Eastern Europe), policies of Westernisation/Europeanisation and of ‘getting to the core’ did come to dominate, and were based around the quest for membership in Western institutions like the EU (Browning 2002).

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6 For a full elaboration see Christopher Browning and Marko Lehti (2006).
Furthermore, Wivel (2002; 2005, 396) argues that for small states drawn to the core of the European project there is a danger that, ensnared by the demands of further integration, they will become entrapped and lose their sovereignty and political independence. This repeats the tendency to treat small states as objects of international politics. In contrast, Finland has played a notable role in partially shaping what European integration is about and how European space and governance are conceptualised. Moreover, it has done this in part by drawing on the notion that Finland is a small state in the northern periphery. Rather than seeing these elements as debilitating, playing on particular ideas of its smallness and peripherality has provided ways in which Finland has sought to gain influence within the core.

To start, it is important to note several points that have facilitated Finnish activism in the 1990s. Central has been the structural change of the end of the Cold War. Combined with the extension of European integration this has meant that the realist power game has been sidelined significantly in Europe. Within the EU, size is increasingly less important when it comes to having influence. This is not to say that matters of power politics have disappeared or that Europe’s great powers do not have more powerful voices, but that Europe’s less powerful states have also been provided with opportunities to speak and need not fear about their long-term survival, since resort to force in the EU security community is considered illegitimate. In short, a different (non-realist) and more liberalist logic of power operates within the EU which creates space for small states to have a voice.

Other important developments relate to the opportunities and effects of globalisation, as well as the fact that since the end of the Cold War the great powers have been floundering around to reconstitute a mission and purpose for themselves and in so doing to also lay out a new structure for the international system. Combined, these have also provided space for small states to play a role in setting regional (if not global) agendas.

In the 1990s, Finland stands out as a state where the opportunities of this favourable climate for a self-proclaimed small state were recognised. This resulted in an interesting retelling of the small-state story in Finland. Tiilikainen (2006, 78–80), for example, has noted how, in an EU context, Finland has acted as a rather typical liberal institutionalist small state by playing on a small-state identity to enhance the ‘community method’ over intergovernmentalism. This has implied supporting strengthening the Commission over the Council of Ministers, since the Commission is seen as a check on the power of the larger states. In other words, in typical liberalist terms institutions have been seen to provide room for manoeuvre for ‘small’ Finland, whilst being ‘small’ has in turn been seen to entail a foreign policy of promoting further institutionalisation.

Arguably, however, this only tells half the story. In contrast, a new discourse of a networking, innovative and globalising Finland has also become evident. This discourse breaks out of the big–small frame and provides Finland with very different possibilities. As Ole Norrback, then Finland’s Minister for European Affairs and Foreign Trade, elaborated in 1998, traditional distinctions between big and small states in terms of size (population, territory) and military power have become anachronistic. More important in determining a state’s standing and influence in today’s globalising, integrating world is whether a state is innovative and active. As he put it, in speaking about the development of Europe’s security
architecture, ‘it is no longer a question of whether you are big or small . . . it is more a question of whether you can produce new ideas and fresh initiatives’ (Norrback 1998, 9). Also reflecting on Finland, Pertti Joenniemi (1998, 62) has stated that the issue is no longer whether you are big or small, but rather whether you are ‘smart’ and have capacity for innovative thinking. He contends that in the post-Cold-War integrating Europe, small states could become more influential, since small states have fewer ‘hang-ups’ than big powers and, hence, ‘small could indeed become a synonym for smart in the post-Cold War era’.

Notably, from the mid-1990s, there was a general repackaging of Finland as an innovator in contemporary politics. This became linked to broader discourses about the entrepreneurial spirit of the pragmatic Finns. Previous historical discourses of the Finns as a ‘frontier’ people were resurrected in light of the country’s embracing of the new frontiers of information technology, most evident in the stunning successes of companies like Nokia. Particularly notable has been Manuel Castell’s and Pekka Himanen’s influential book on Finland as a model for the information society. According to them, one reason why Finland has successfully embraced globalisation and high technology is because Finland’s history as a northern frontier (culturally, politically, climatically) has prioritised questions of survival. In consequence, Finnish identity has been future-oriented, pragmatic, adaptable and embracing of new ideas and technologies (Castells and Himanen 2004, 127–139). Again, therefore, being on the margins (of life/global politics) is understood as providing Finland with competence and resources that older, larger and more centrally located European countries lack. Likewise, a recent report by the influential Finnish Business and Policy Forum (EVA) rejected debates of the 1990s that focused on the need to be at the EU core and rather set out a vision for Finland as one of a select group of ‘vanguard states’ at the forefront of adapting to and shaping globalisation (Ruokanen 2004). Thus, in contrast to the institutionalist small-state discourse identified by Tiilikainen regarding Finnish EU policy, a contending discourse is also apparent where ‘smallness’ has dropped out as an issue and where even the institutional context of the EU is seen as limiting. Instead of focusing on European integration, if Finland is a ‘smart state’ the optimum strategy, it is argued, would be to concentrate on processes of globalisation.

At the political level, this emphasis on entrepreneurialism and activism has been evident in several respects. For example, Finland has been active (especially compared with ‘small’ states like Belgium, Greece and Portugal) in trying to shape the European security architecture (Archer 1998, 58–59), not least through its sponsorship (with Sweden) of the Petersburg Tasks promoting the EU’s role in crisis management, peacekeeping and humanitarian and rescue tasks. Most notable, however, has been Finland’s sponsorship from 1997 onwards of the Northern Dimension Initiative (NDI), a regional cooperation framework inclusive of Russia, where Finland has made a virtue out of its location on Europe’s northern periphery. Whereas traditionally the ‘North’ has been associated with negative perceptions, conjuring up images of darkness, cold and peripherality, now the North has appeared as a place from which to speak, to act and to position Finland in Europe and the EU game (for example, Heininen and Käkön 1998). Not least, the concept of the ‘North’ has been seen as a resource that can be used to transcend previous East–West divides and as a space where a new relationship with Russia can be forged.
In Ojanen’s (1999) view, through the NDI, Finland has successfully ‘customised’ the EU towards its concerns, thereby making the EU in some sense more Finnish. The driving force of the initiative has been to remind the EU that with Finland’s membership in 1995 the Union gained a long border with Russia. The NDI has been a way to strengthen the EU’s foreign policy in the North, particularly towards Russia, and in this process multilateralise Finnish–Russian relations. The essence of the NDI has lain in adopting strategies of soft security promotion, from promoting trade, to tackling problems of infrastructure, health and the environment, as a way to enhance security and stability in Northern Europe. However, as noted, more idealistically the aim has been to finally overcome dividing lines in the North, and to do this by giving Russia an equal voice in agenda-setting and policy implementation.

The important point here is that the inclusion of Russia and the desire to overcome previous divides fundamentally problematises what constitutes the EU’s inside and outside. By promoting high levels of regionalisation, the NDI aims to replace previous East–West divides with a Northern signifier encompassing all within the region. Instead of trying to escape from its peripherality, Finland has seen its peripherality (Northernness) as a resource (Joenniemi 2000; Medvedev 2001, 98). Finland’s power, therefore, derives precisely from its location on the EU’s edge and border with Russia. Instead of letting the EU and Russia define that border, utilising the Northern signifier has been a way to break out of centrist understandings of what Europe is about and to promote a more decentralised Europe. From being an edge, the North has been presented as ‘an innovative meeting place’ and ‘frontier’ (Valtsasaari 1999) and even as a blank space where new stories of European identity emphasising commonality and cooperation with Russia can be written (Medvedev 2001). Instead of running to the core, through the NDI, it has been emphasised that Europe-making can also go on in the periphery.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through the case study of Finland, this article has highlighted an important oversight in the literature on small states. In traditional rationalist and positivist analyses (especially in their neorealist versions), emphasis has been placed on drawing out generalised patterns of behaviour, central to which has been a conflation between smallness, weakness and a limited capacity for action. The result is that in the mainstream literature small states remain depicted as objects of international relations largely at the mercy of others’ actions.

In contrast, building on cognitivist insights that self-perceptions are important, the article adopted a discursive approach to argue that the implications of ‘size’ for foreign policy are as much a function of how size is narrated as they are a result of objective measurable indicators. Thus, it was argued that being ‘small’ is not an objective given, but a matter of negotiation, whilst at the same time smallness need not necessarily imply weakness. This is not to deny the constraints that limited resources in comparison with others may entail, but it is to argue that the capacities available to self-proclaimed small states are also often as much a function of the resources understood to exist within an identity of smallness. As the case study of Finland has demonstrated, smallness can be told in different
ways, with this impacting on the horizon of actions that become conceivable for the state. Thus, in the Finnish case smallness has been narrated at different times as both a restriction and an opportunity and facilitating condition.

Finally, the Finnish case has also revealed an interesting development where the previous fascination with size has begun to be replaced by different discursive frames. On the one hand, this is evident in a shift from a discursive structure of ‘big–small’, to one emphasising concerns of ‘core–periphery’. The Finnish lesson in this case is that being small or on the periphery can entail resources for gaining subjectivity and influence. In the case of the NDI, for instance, peripherality has been used to the Finns’ advantage, but also in such a way that Finland has been able to impact on the evolution of European political space. On the other hand, there has also been a growing emphasis on a discourse that emphasises innovation and smartness over concerns of size. In the European context, in which overt power politics has become an ‘un-European’ and illegitimate policy stance, the question the Finnish case raises is whether or not remaining fixated by questions of size is beginning to miss the point. The Finnish lesson in this respect, for policy-makers and academics alike, would seem to be that remaining preoccupied with size threatens to become debilitating, whilst shifting to a different discursive framework would be the smart move for a smart state, whether big or small.

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