THE SECURITY OF SMALL STATES: A FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Abdur Rob Khan
Mohammad Humayun Kabir

The security of small states, specially of those in the Third World, attracted little scholarly attention compared to the magnitude of the problem. The magnitude is indicated by the incidence of violences and local wars since World War II on the one hand and the internal turmoils and instabilities in these countries on the other. By one estimate, out of the 64 wars that have taken place since the World War II, 61 took place in the Third World areas. Of them 38 were inter-state, 18 internal with significant external inputs and 7 anti-colonial.\(^1\) By another estimate covering the period 1945-1976, a total of 120 armed conflicts took place on the territories of 71 countries involving 84 countries. Although only 5 were fought on the territories of developed countries, these industrially developed Western countries participated in 64 conflicts all the same. More interestingly, 36 out of the 120 local conflicts were confined within the state boundaries.\(^2\)

Thus the post-War conflict dynamics displayed the dominant trend of almost exclusive Third World focus, internal instabilities and violences combined with substantial external inputs.\(^3\) Compared to this, however, the post-War security deliberations have been dominated by the systemic-security paradigm based on the assumption that global security is basically contingent on East-West central balance. Implicit in this conceptualisation is another assumption that security problems are proportionate to their size.\(^4\) The intellectual resources and literature on security that have grown prodigiously in the post-War period, therefore
remain ethnocentric in tradition and partial in scope with the vast majority of the states that constitute the Third World finding only peripheral treatment to the extent they have bearing on the central balance. The security problems of the small states constituting more than 80 per cent of the Third World in the process get further relegated. A second reason for the peripheral position of the small states is that the types of problems usually faced by the small states are often characterized as those of underdevelopment and backwardness rather than of security as such.

Only in very recent years, small states' security is attracting some academic attention. Events in the Falklands and Grenada attracted some official attention as well. But wide divergence persists among scholars regarding the precise definition of both "small states" and "security". Questions are also raised as to the usefulness of the concept "small states" as a meaningful subject of study. Then there are a number of policy issues: What constraints are faced by the small states on possible policy and independent action merely by virtue of their size? Should national security be treated as one among many other goals or national concerns, or as the key element to which everything should be related? The present paper aims at answering some of these questions.

Small States—A Meaningful Frame of Analysis?

The term 'small states' figured in international politics for the first time as small power as contrast to great powers in the Treaty of Chaumont concluded in March 1814. The Treaty categorised those states (powers) as 'small' which were not in a position to provide 60,000 men each for the next 20 years in the event of another French aggression. The salience of this definition is two-fold: it laid emphasis on military or war capability measured in terms of armed forces; second, the small states needed tacit recognition as small by the powers. The recognition aspect was later combined with self-perception of smallness by Rothstein who defined small states as one:

which recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capability and it must rely fundamentally on the aid of other states, institutions and processes or developments and so, the small powers' belief in its inability to rely on its own measure must also be recognized by other states involved in the international politics (emphasis added).
In subsequent academic parlance two trends were observed, the first was to consider ‘small’ in terms of the basic and commonplace indicators of size like territory and population, GNP, productive capability, resource base, industrial capacity etc. International organisations like the World Bank, IMF, Commonwealth etc. categorise small states on the basis of population and the dividing line is usually one million population size. Following this size limit, the international organizations practically concentrate on the problems of what are otherwise known as those of the micro-states and miniscule territories. In current literature on security and international relations, these states are considered specialized types of small states and are excluded from the purview of discourse. The quantitative indicators, therefore, not only put an upper limit but also the bottom line for defining small states. Question may be raised as to the usefulness of such a partial approach because these states are also small states and on any typological scale, they are characterized by as many particularistic features as are others above the line.

The second was the capability aspect which also gained prominence in defining small states. According to this view, small states are those which are weak economically, militarily, technologically and in industrial capacity. This is somewhat a broad-based view considering all facets of capability of states. In respect of security, however, it was again the military or war making capability that was given the central weightage with economic or technological and for that matter, political capability finding practically a supplementary role. Such a view is found among others, in Talukder Maniruzzaman:

In determining a state’s war making capacity, one has to look at both its potential war power and its immediate war preparedness. Both the potential war capability and current war preparation of a state are generally measured in quantitative terms.... the Gross National Product (GNP) of a state indicates its potential war-making capacity.... GNP subsumes all the elements that constitute the potential military power of a state. As to the current war preparedness of a state, the yearly military budget is probably the best indicator.

Constructing composite scores of war capability for each nation, Maniruzzaman comes out with the findings that 95 out of 108 Third World
states (88 percent) are small which means “a very low conventional war capability” (combined score less than one). In general, quantitative indicators provide impressive results with apparently impressive ranking of the states. But major problem with quantitative exercises is that they fail to capture some significant qualitative aspects of a state in the absence of which a realistic ranking cannot be obtained. Moreover, one has to end up with an arbitrary line of demarcation between small and large states.

To obviate some of these limitations, descriptive and subjective aspects like the amount or value of interaction received by states (recognition aspect), the self-perceptions of leaders and the general public and perceptions of actors external to the state are also used to identify small states. Attempts have also been made to categorise states on their specific behavioural characteristics in international interaction. For example, the foreign policy behaviour of small states is characterised by highly conflictual action, high propensity for risk-taking and a relatively high levels of commitment and inflexibility.\textsuperscript{10}

A further element in growing interest in country size has been the revival of theories of dependence as a major element of development.\textsuperscript{11} It has been argued that countries are exploited and inhibited from developing because of concentration of decision making in developed countries, institutions and multinational corporations. Technological and cultural dependence completes the dependency scenario. Schaffer constructed another set of scores by which it was possible to rank countries into some kind of pecking order with most dependent countries at the bottom.\textsuperscript{12} Such a score could also take into account other elements as degree of autonomy in decision making, internal integration, the existence of military or political client status, isolation or poverty. By this, we may be describing a situation of asymmetry in the ability to take autonomous decisions, where external decisions and events have a far greater effect inside than internal decision and events have outside the country.

From the above it turns out that country size has been variously used depending on the objectives, context as well as individual predispositions. Many more quantitative and qualitative indicators may be devised, even abstract or subjective aspects may be quantified but again scholars would seldom agree on the list of countries falling in the category of small.
Perhaps guided by these practical and conceptual problems, some scholars have attempted to keep the definition somewhat broad-based because "smallness of the countries is associated more with what can be called a 'Third World syndrome' in which nations are subjected to a stigma of smallness in terms their total capacity to deter their security in view of their inherent and enormous socio-economic and political problems irrespective of the size of their land area, population and even at times enormous wealth". This is perhaps a very broad a definition encompassing some of the large states in the Third World which may otherwise have all the "Third World syndrome" yet by other conventional standards like size, population, resource base, industrial and technological base and political system to overcome those syndromes they are large. Others have tended to equate small states which has come to be known as "weak state syndrome." The Commonwealth Consultative Group preferred to work on the basis of the key concept of "vulnerabilities" which also seems to be a realistic description yet lacking any precision of the qualitative attributes that constitute vulnerabilities.

Looking at the experience of some of the small states like Singapore, Israel, where 'small' in terms of physical size or population did not really stand in the way of attaining certain desirable level of development and security, it may be argued that it is not smallness alone that is the issue at hand. Problems like poverty, isolation, particularism and socio-political fragility also matter in point of security. It may also be pointed out that the problems facing the small states are not unique, their particular difficulties arise from their greater vulnerability and inadequate capability to respond to crisis because of size limitation. By the very nature of their size, they are susceptible to both natural and man-made disasters. We have got to have a starting point for which perhaps a combined index of population, geographical size, economic indicators like GNP, industrial productive capacity and current annual defence budget would be sufficient. Once we have indentified the small states by such a combined index, our concern is to understand how smallness aggravates the various problems of under development, poverty and instability and how to find out elbow rooms for the small states to move and survive.

Distinctive Characteristics of Small Developing Countries
To start with, the only general statement that can be made about the
small states is that there is a sheer diversity in size, level of social, political and economic development, intra-mural problems, geopolitical and strategic realities of the small states. Even then some general characteristics may perhaps be brought out because they more or less share a colonial past, unequal encounters with Western developed countries, poverty, social dislocation, lack of national integration and inadequate linkages with central issue of the international system. In what follows, the distinctive characteristics of the small states vis-a-vis the larger states are brought out:

Stage of Nation Building: In general, the small states are at the initial stages of nation building processes which they also share with other larger developing countries. The task of nation building today for the Third World countries is many times more stupendous and complicated than that faced by the today's developed countries three to four hundred years ago. Partly because of the present international system of interdependence and fast communication, and partly because of revolution in rising expectations of the common mass following political independence, the formidable challenge of nation building facing the newly emergent countries is one of telescoping the progress of centuries within decades. Secondly, the problems are of different dimensions and magnitude. Many of these erstwhile colonial societies are yet to resolve the basic problems of national identity and statehood. The colonial legacies left the various social forces and institutions asymmetrically developed. Lack of a national consensus on core values and goals is a major impediment to continuity and stability in development efforts. Thirdly, the very fundamental task of providing basic needs to the fast growing population is so much demanding that it leads to many adhocisms and short term measures that affect the long term development of the countries on a stable and firm footing.

While most these problems are more or less common to most of the developing countries, the problems are reflected in the small countries in magnified form with more intensity. For one, the small developing countries are characterised by a very small elite base with no countervailing or alternative forces in sight. Apart from concentration of power and a tendency to stem the growth of alternative leadership base, there is a tendency to identify regime security with state security resulting in obvious distortion in conceptualisation of national
security. The nation's search for a stable political system suffers setbacks and aspirations of the many component ethnic/religious or interest groups are not reflected in the mainstream.

Secondly, the small states have less resilience and shock absorbing capacity, two very indispensable requirements to go through the painful processes of nation building activities. Although it is often argued that the post-colonial societies in general inherit a relatively over developed state structure the administrative capability is extremely limited to withstand the test of crisis-management. Thirdly, in most cases, seeds of nationalism and nationalistic feelings remain dormant and forces of divisiveness, cleavages, primordial loyalty and particularism affect social and political cohesion.

Fourthly, in addition to limited administrative capability, the diplomatic and economic leverages of these small states are also inadequate to influence the external environ. In most cases, the small states have to be at the receiving end of the interplay of international forces. Moreover, the foreign policy of the small states are characterized by charisma, moralistic overtone and less backed by strength—political, military and economic—and ideological forces.

Dependency: Dependency is perhaps one of the striking features of the national development efforts of the small developing countries. Dependency may be traced to many vital areas like concentration of decision making in the developed countries and large MNCs on the one hand and cultural dependence on the other, thanks to colonial legacies and revolution in global communication system. There is a tendency to shift the onus of dependency beyond the frontier. To an extent it is true because, the small states are likely to be more dependent than larger countries and hence subject to more constraints on possible policies. The room for manoeuvre of the decision makers is correspondingly narrow as well. But there is an internal dimension of dependency as well reflected in extremely inequitable social and economic structure. Secondly, there is an inertia among the decision makers to perpetrate dependency as well. To an extent it is psychological weakness, a "smallness syndrome" perhaps and to an extent it fits well into the present international system of power hierarchy. It is often argued that a real small state is one that has no option before it or the decision makers are not willing to utilise the options available to them.
A third dimension of dependency is the influence and manipulations of the various foreign and transnational bodies operating within the territories. This particular phenomenon poses great diplomatic and administrative challenge to the leadership of the small states in influencing external environment to their advantage. A successful internal diplomacy in terms of projecting the national image and dealing with the external bodies operating within the territory form a position of strength compensate greatly the obvious limitations in the external diplomatic front.

**Economic Underdevelopment**: The small states in general are characterised by narrow and fragile economic structure, poor and unexploited resource base, small size of domestic market, difficulties in penetrating foreign markets, lack of indigenous technology and poor infrastructural facilities. These economies are dependent on the export earnings of one or two primary commodities. Their relative openness makes them particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of international market.

Another important dimension of economic underdevelopment and dependency is the *extreme debt burden* that limits state autonomy, adds to power incongruity and eats up the future of these nations. In a significant way debt burden is a given fact of life for most of the small states at least for the foreseeable future. But then to a certain extent efficient use of resources and internal management of development activities may set the declining trend in aid requirement in motion.

**Geostrategic Factors and Geopolitical Realities**: Many small states are in possession of one or more strategic raw materials that invite attention, potential as well as active interests, of the international powers. This makes their position vulnerable. Then many of the states in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, because of their strategic location, become easy pawns of international politics, likewise the location of the land-locked countries near crisis spots or their being buffer between two powers makes them geopolitically vulnerable as compared to states having access to the sea.

**Defining Security in the Context of the Small States**

The commonplace definition of security is immunity of a state or nation to threats originating mainly from outside its territorial boundaries.
Walter Lippmann argues that security rises and falls with the ability of a nation to deter an attack or defeat it. Lippmann also argues:

A nation is secure to the extent to which it was not in danger of having to sacrifice core values, if it wishes to avoid war and is able, if challenged, to maintain them by such a victory in such a war.

There is not much elaboration in Lippmann as to what constitutes core values. Perhaps core values in the context of a nation state are the values and aspirations that not only identify the nation as is known but also those which guide the course of the nation. Operationally, however, the vagueness of this definition still remains. Perhaps in order to remove some of the vagueness Talukder Maniruzzaman narrowed the scope further when he says: “By security we mean protection and preservation of minimum core values of any nation; political independence and territorial integrity”. In view of the changing nature of security threats, this becomes a somewhat technical definition of security. Although physical threats can not be ruled out in the wake of some events as in Kampuchea, Afghanistan, the Falakands and Grenada, states in recent years have become more concerned with threats of a non-military character—external domination of country’s economy by foreign citizen or corporations, dependence on other countries for scientific research and technological developments, unrestricted movement of ideas resulting in the erosion and eventual loss of national identity. Viewed in this sense, national security can no longer refer only to the preservation of independence and territorial integrity of the state. It must now relate to the protection of a state’s citizens, their distinctive institutions and values, and to the external environment (economic, cultural, ecological as well as military) in decision making is also within which each state must operate. The point is the essence of independence and territorial integrity or ‘vital national values’ the core of the core but if one aims at protecting literally the essence, the essence or core becomes nominal because threats to the core becomes imminent only when the outer shell has been penetrated and in such a situation, the chances of independence and for that matter, security being compromised in varying degrees on various fronts are many. In today's world of interdependence and today's realities of dependence...
and operations of various MNCs and other foreign/international organizations, this phenomenon of "creeping insecurity" is no less formidable than the direct physical threat. It may also be pointed out that defining security in terms of protection of 'core value' has an external directedness, as also is the case with other definitions. But in the context of the small states, core value, or the sense of belongingness to a particular territorial entity is also eaten up internally by various forces as we have seen earlier.

The external directedness of security has its origin virtually in the systemic concept of security which encompasses not only an ideology but also a group of states subscribing to the ideology. Security of the state, in this frame of thinking, follows a deductive reasoning—if the system is secured, the components are secured. More precisely the argument runs like this: security is indivisible, it cannot be approached piecemeal; if security is threatened anywhere, it poses a threat everywhere. Ideally, this is true, but, the logic of organism is stretched too far in this argument. In the final analysis, security in this view is reduced to security of the two competing power blocs in which the vast number of countries in the Third World, the small states inclusive, figure rather peripherally, to the extent they have bearing on the central balance. But in the tug of war the security of these large number of states is endangered because the theatre of conflicts over the past two decades has shifted physically to the Third World, as we have seen at the outset. Moreover, the internal and peculiar problems of the Third World which themselves have little to do with the central balance get overlooked.

It would be more appropriate to look at security in an inductive sequence, that is, security of the components leading to security of the whole. One advantage of this frame of thinking is that it can encompass not only the state level security in its realistic perspective but also that below the state level, that is the people. It might sound somewhat intriguing because one may also extend this inductivity to include the security of the component groups within a state opening up a new debate. But that also brings us very close to the types of security problems we have been talking in the context of the small developing states. "It is increasingly being realised that it is poverty, not the lack of military hardware, that is responsible for insecurity across the southern half of the planet".21 This is not to ignore the need for military prepared-
ness but to put it in correct perspective that McNamara puts:

Security means development. Security is not military hardware, though it may include it; security is not military force, though it may involve it, security is not traditional military activity, though it may encompass it. Security is development and without development, there can be no security.22

The same conviction was also echoed by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of Maldives when he said:

economic development...is the frontline of battle...Remove the debilitating effects of poverty, and the first—the most important—battle will be won, and quite possibly the war. It will never be enough, or indeed good enough, for the small states...to be just well defended bastions of poverty.23

From the above, it turns out that security and development are enmeshed in each other: a nation must start with security, that is, political independence and territorial integrity, it must develop to ensure and preserve that security and if it develops it ends up with security. Development in this line of argument is quite broad-based, it encompasses not only economic development in terms of providing basic needs to the hungry mass but also political, social and cultural development. One great advantage of this broad conceptualisation of security is that it can minimise the age-old and intractable problem of defence-development dilemma as is faced even by the developed and large countries.

By way of summarising the main arguments of this section we may construct an Interaction Model of Insecurity of the small states in terms of two key concepts 'Vulnerability' and 'Threat' as shown in Fig. 1. In this model, 'security' is conceived not only in terms of absence of threats—internal and external, but also in terms of elimination of vulnerabilities. At the primary level, the inputs to insecurity are three-fold:

- a. Size constraint—area, population in relation to resource base, economic structure and production capacity;
- b. Underdevelopment and dependency;
- c. Geopolitical and geostrategic—locational factors.

These three inputs interact with each other to produce secondary level inputs;
The Security of Small States: A Framework

a. Vulnerabilities

b. Threats—internal and external

which, in turn, constitute the elements of insecurity of the small states at the critical level.

![Diagram of Small States Insecurity]

Figure 1: Interaction Model of Small States Insecurity

Nature and Sources of Insecurity of the Small States

The interaction model that we have just presented indicate that the small states suffer from a number of vulnerabilities that in combination with other factors produce threats to security of the small states. While the small states may share these vulnerabilities with other developing states, the point is if the small states are targeted, they are inherently incapable of coping with them and they can hardly absorb the shock and traumas of the threats. In what follows we present a brief outline of the nature and sources of threats to the security of small states. It would also be worthwhile to understand where and how the identified sources of threats to security are reflected.

The sources of threats to security of small states may be categorised as territorial, political, economic, cultural, ideological and technological. These sources are however, highly interacting and interdependent and they can at best be analytically separated.

Territorial Threats to Security of Small States: Territorial threats to security are mainly the outcome of colonial legacies and historical for-
Security of Small States

In most cases decolonisation was accompanied by artificial demarcation of borders leaving scope for claims and counter-claims. Such territorial disputes centering on unresolved boundaries are generally confined between neighbours. These issues in general pose no serious problem and nation states have also been able to resolve some of them peacefully. When the disputed territory has some other geopolitical and strategic significance the disputes are not easily resolved. These territorial threats normally take the shape of border incursions and punitive actions.

Threats to territorial security may also emanate from internal sources like rebellion/insurgents, who with aid from adverse powers control certain parts of the territory.

In recent years, non-military threats from private sources involved in arms and drug smuggling and maritime piracy are getting prominent, specially for the island states and other smaller states attracting little international attention otherwise.

Threats to Political Independence: External sources of threats to political independence come through military threat/coercion, diplomatic manipulation, subversion, espionage in order to bring the small states within the orbit of influence or coerce the nation concerned into taking certain decisions with the use of economic and political leverages.

Internally, threats to political independence arise mainly from political instability, lack of growth of political institutions, narrow elite base and extreme concentration of power in few hands. As chronic instability engulfs the nation, it becomes fertile ground for ideological penetration, subversion and espionage. Moreover, the nation itself loses a sense of direction, the regime in power resorts to repressive measures out of fear psychosis and crisis-perception. As the political, military and administrative capabilities of the small states are limited the ruling regimes sometimes take external assistance to quell internal dissent and disorder. The concessions given to external allies in return, impinge on the political independence of the small states.

Threats to Economic Security: Economic problems are the most substantive aspects of the security of small states because they are of immediate relevance to the people at large and also the state itself. Threats to economic security mainly concern small resource base, especi-
lisation of exports into one or two items, high dependence on foreign aid and technology and extreme debt burden. Lack of or inadequate control over resources, incursions into economic zone may also be considered serious threats to economic security.

Internally, poverty, uneven rural and urban development, dislocations and uncertainties associated with social, cultural and environmental change brought about by the very development process can profoundly affect the social and political stability and security environment of the small states. The problems are compounded by natural disasters like flood, cyclones, typhoons and drought that sometimes destroys the economic and social base of the small states.

**Threats to Cultural Security and Psychological Dependency:** Apart from the above sources of insecurity, the small states suffer from a number of problems impinging on their autonomy. This is caused by a peculiar combination of lack of sufficient national unity, psychological dependence, weakness in political leadership, lack of information and inertia.

Small countries will inevitably be open to foreign influence of various kinds. The lack of sufficiently strong nationalistic feeling may reflect existence of an elite whose attitudes and interests are centered on metropolitan areas. And in a small states such attitude and values may permeate the whole structure of the society through education system and communication media.

Psychological dependence on the other hand may reflect the objective conditions like total import dependence, predominance of foreign investment and foreign ownership/control of resources and installations. The decision makers will naturally have a low morale and the basis of self-confidence would be lacking, so much so that the decision makers may not be disposed to examining all possible alternatives. The game is lost before start.

Lack of information is certainly a central reason for failure to exploit all possibilities. To negotiate successfully with external powers or MNCs or an aid agency it is imperative to understand what their interests are and what alternatives are open to them.

**An Approach to the Security of Small States**

It was believed two or three decades ago that the micro and small states were not viable entities in international politics both economically
and politically. But almost all of them now exist and show signs of continued existence as nation states and as members of the United Nations and other regional and international bodies. If not for any other reasons, it is extantism—that is the international ideology which supports the status quo on international frontiers of new states once they have been established and acts as a limitation on splitting-up of states except in extreme circumstance. Moreover, the existence of large number of small states may be tolerated by the main decision makers in the international community to their own advantage in so far as the strength and bargaining power of small states is less than that of large countries. Even then events in Chad, Grenada, Afghanistan, Kampuchea and Lebanon suggests that international ideology of status quo may at best serve as a moral deterrent which may be broken by the large powers and once certain powers have decided to break it international ideology becomes largely ineffective.

A word about the parametric constraint of options suggested in this paper. The reality of the present day international politics is the existence of constraints on asserting independence on the part of the small states. If the small states accept the status quo in international power hierarchy even at the cost of compromising part of their right to make independent decision, there is no immediate threat from the international system in general and the international actors in particular including the MNCs. But asserting independence on the part of the small states will definitely invite hostile and unwelcome reaction from the international actors. In other words, attempt at ensuring security, as perceived by the states or the people may itself constitute a threat to their security.

Such an apparent situation of hopelessness should not, however, circumscribe the options available to the small states. In the short and medium terms with which planners and decision makers are mainly concerned with, perhaps size and related constraints have to be taken as a datum. But if long terms is viewed basically in terms of a series of short term measures, the security options of the small states, would boil down to the question of efficient management backed by correct awareness of the options available to them. According to this view, security is a problem of management "of timing, sequencing and manipulation in an unending efforts to perceive or create in any case, to exploit the multiplicity of little opportunities and openings."24
A full understanding of what is possible and what all options are available or may be created, cannot be achieved by the strategists, or the policy makers, the practitioners or social scientists and other elites individually. Scope for actions and room for manoeuvrability on individual fronts or sectors are quite narrow because of size limits. This very particular reality makes it all the more imperative for a multi-disciplinary approach so as to explore all possible insights and possibilities.

Notes


4. One is reminded of a verse by renowned poet Robert Frost: "Super powers number two or three, the small states can only be."

5. This refers to the seminal work of the Commonwealth titled *Vulnerability: Small States in the Global Society* by the Commonwealth Consultative Group pursuant upon the decision of the Commonwealth Heads of Government in New Delhi, October 1983.


7. See Maniruzzaman, *op. cit.*


16. For an elaboration in country specific case of Bangladesh, see M Abdul Hafiz and Abdur Rob Khan (eds), *Nation Building in Bangladesh: Retrospect and Prospect* (Dhaka: BIISS, 1986).


20. *Ibid*, p. 15


22. *Ibid*.
