Small States in Great Power Politics

Understanding the "Buffer Effect"

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This paper deals with the concept of "small states" as opposed to "great powers". Both concepts are considered to be ideal types with peculiar behaviour characteristics. It is argued that in certain circumstances (i.e. within a "buffer system") small states may affect the behaviour of great powers in a way that mitigates the latter's rivalry. It appears that a buffer state jammed between two rivals is not a pawn but a pivot in great power games, which may choose from a range of strategies (balancing, bandwagoning, leaning to a third power, staying neutral, or hedging risks) to sustain its survival as an independent unit. By applying the game theory approach to analyse great power relationships, the paper demonstrates how a "win-lose" game transforms into a "win-win" game, and what is the role of small buffer states in this transformation. Touching upon the problem of unequal powers' interactions, this piece of research contributes to the extant literature on asymmetry in international relations mainly in a theoretical way, drawing attention to a virtually forgotten sphere of international relations — buffer systems — mostly overlooked by the current IR discourse.

Keywords: small states, great powers, buffer system, power asymmetry, interstate relations.

Unequal power distribution among sovereign states that determines their difference in power projection capabilities is a fundamental feature of international relations. There is a widespread assumption that the global international system and its regional subsystems are formed primarily by interactions among greater states, which pursue their national interests, while smaller states have to accept the resulting balance of power and imposed rules of the game. Yet the reality is counter-intuitive: power asymmetry does not necessarily lead to absolute subjection of the weaker side to the stronger one. As Womack explains,

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> Asymmetric relationships are by definition unequal, but they are far from constituting a simple pecking order of domination.
>
> An asymmetric relationship is one in which the smaller side is significantly more exposed to interactions than the larger side because of the disparity of capabilities, and yet the larger is not able to dictate unilaterally the terms of the relationship. [1]

For the last fifty years the IR theory was enriched by plenty of scholarship, which demonstrated the ability of smaller states to resist great powers pressure. While being inspired by classic works on small states,[2] this article aims to integrate their findings with some recent research on power asymmetry.[3] It discusses specific conditions, under which smaller states may influence the politics of greater powers. This article contributes to abundant literature on this topic in two ways: first, by conducting of a broad survey on (predominantly Western) small state theorising; and second, by applying the "prisoner's dilemma" model to the study of small buffer states behaviour. The game theory approach provides a useful tool for better understanding of asymmetric interactions (in particular, it explains the shift from "win-lose" to "win-win" game strategies of the great powers), thus adding more value to this work.

The article addresses several research questions: What is a small state? How is it fitted into the buffer system? What opportunities the latter provides for a small state to get "oversized", i.e. to exert some influence on greater powers, which otherwise it could not exert? The narrative proceeds as follows: first, the notions of "small states" and "great powers" are clarified; second, their interactions within the "buffer system" and the "buffer complex" are analysed. In conclusion, some practical implementations and theoretical implications of the analytic model presented here are discussed.

Small states and great powers

The phenomenon of national power stands at the core of academic discourse in International Relations and some adjacent disciplines (e.g. Geopolitics, International Security). However, there is hardly any consensus on terminology of unequal powers, which is "imprecise and subject to judgements."[4] In dozen of works analysed in this article, mighty states were (sometimes interchangeably) denoted as: "*powers*", "*major powers*", "*great powers*", "*big powers*", "*strong powers*", "*powerful states*", "*large states*". Less mighty states were defined as: "*minor powers*", "*small powers*", "*small nations*", "*small countries*", "*small states*", "*weak states*", "*weak powers*" and suchlike. As Long rightfully indicates, all these definitions are conventional by their nature, since the notion of national power is conventional too.[5]

Starting from two different perspectives on national power, Mosser distinguishes between two types of definitions: absolute and relative. Absolute definitions consider national power a nation's essential attribute. Power-as-attribute is a quantitative feature that may be summed up to certain numbers reflecting the nation's geographical, demographic, military, political, social, economic, cultural, and other characteristics.[6] Absolute definitions imply quantitative criteria (such as size of territory, population, or national income) to separate more and less mighty nations. The easiest way to do so is to draw a line where "small states" become big enough to qualify for a higher status: for instance, the Commonwealth adopted the criterion of population less than 1.5 million for a country to be considered a "small state".[7]

Though power-as-attribute approaches may have their logic, yet they seem to produce inappropriate analytical tools. As Baehr noted,

> Most authors who want to use the concept of "small states" for purposes of analysis struggle at length with the problem of definition. First of all, there is the problem of which criteria are to be adopted… Once the criteria are set out, the problem remains where to draw the line among "small" and "large", or possibly "small", "middle", and "very large". Often the preferred solution may be clear and unambiguous, but at the same time arbitrary and intellectually difficult to defend; more sophisticated definitions, on the other hand, are often more ambiguous and difficult to apply to concrete cases.[8]

Thus we see that the main obstacle to a wider use of absolute definitions is the absence of clear quantitative criteria, which mark the

transition of a state from the category of "objects" to "subjects" of international politics. As Bjøl fairly pointed out,

> It is undoubtedly possible to establish a sort of international stratification by quantitative criteria: GNP, area, population, armed forces, etc. It is, however, highly questionable how useful this is... Since international politics consists by definition of interactions within social systems, what is of analytical significance, are relationships between various components, which may be equals and which may be unequals. In the latter cases it may be reasonable to speak of small state [and great power] *roles*. [9]

The latter point clearly demonstrates the relative nature of national power. Contrary to the power-as-attribute approach, which implies that national power is a *constant* that can be measured separately for every nation, power-as-relation definitions consider national power a *variable*, which takes greater or lesser values depending on what nations are being compared to each other. Therefore, "small states" and "great powers" are not substantial entities per se, but labels given to nations, which reflect different international roles assigned to the latter according to their respective power levels.

There are three types of relative definitions. Definitions of the first type underline qualitative power differences between nations. Thus, Vandenbosch defines the "small state" as "a state which is unable to contend in war with the great powers on anything like equal terms." [10] The diplomatic weakness of "small states", their insignificant role in world politics make them "stakes" rather than "players" in great power games. They have to "take", rather than "make", rules and norms of global governance. [11] What is peculiar about "small states" is their inability to protect themselves against aggressors; they have to rely on other states or international organizations to sustain their sovereignty. [12] In other words, "the small states are consumers rather than producers of security." [13]

Similarly, Vital suggests that "a small state is more vulnerable to pressure, more likely to give way under stress, more limited in respect of the political options open to it, and subject to a tighter connection between domestic and external affairs [than a great power]." He draws the line between "small states" and "great powers" at a government's (in)ability "to induce other states—or governments—to follow lines of conduct or policy which they might otherwise not pursue." [14]

Another relational understanding of national power is presented by Rothstein. Acknowledging that "a definition of small powers based on tangible 'elements of power' is unsatisfactory," he offers a qualitative criterion of power distribution that emphasizes a state's (in)ability to survive on its own, without entering alliances with others. He calls "a mall power" "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."[15] Therefore, "small powers" and "great powers" do not just differ in size, but form two separate classes with different qualitative characteristics.

Developing Rothstein's arguments, Handel points out that the national power of small states bases mainly on external factors (such as international regimes or alliances), while great powers enjoy wide spectrum of internal sources of power (such as geographic location, natural resources, industrial development, human capital, organizational capabilities, etc.). As a rule, small states become vassals, satellites, or clients of greater powers; yet,

> Even if one agrees that the nature of the international system is primarily determined by the number of great powers and their interrelationships, weak states are by no means impotent, helpless victims of the system. On the contrary, they are quick to take advantage of the opportunities arising from the nature of any given international system. They learn to manipulate the competition between the great powers to their own ends, and in this way they exert a considerable influence, even if not a critical one, on the system itself.[16]

Buzan distinguishes between "weak states" and "weak powers". He argues that "[a] strong state defines itself from within and fills the gap between its neighbours," while "[a] very weak state may be defined more as a gap between its neighbours." Small powers, in their turn, are "weak" in comparison to surrounding nations. Their weakness "is relative to the capabilities commanded by other states... and frequently stems from the fact that they are relatively small and/or poorly organised."[17] Here we see a more elaborated relative approach, where differences in power projection capabilities are explained through qualitative characteristics of the states.

Definitions of the second type base on differences in threat perception and foreign policy behaviour of more and less mighty powers. Thus,

Baker Fox denoted "[s]uccess or failure in securing its own demands or resisting the demands of other states" as the key criterion for separating "great powers" and "small powers". She suggests that "small powers" are "local" by their nature, because their "demands are restricted to their own and immediately adjacent areas," while "great powers" "exert their influence over wider areas."[18] Similarly, Bjøl points out that power disparity between "small states" and "great powers" results in difference of their foreign policy behaviour: the former's national interests are narrow, sometimes bilateral; the latter have much broader international agenda, which is defined primarily by considerations of prestige. But the most important factor in distinguishing between unequal powers is their approach to national security. Political elites of "great powers" understand national security primarily as capacity for power projection far abroad, while the leadership of "small states" consider national security as capability to effectively resist external interference.[19]

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Raeymaeker states that "small countries lack both the capacity and the political will to act offensively and to exert a decisive influence on other nations… The foreign policy of small states therefore aims at withstanding pressure from the great powers." However, contrary to many scholars who explains the specific perception of security by "small states" in terms of absolute criteria (small territory, little population, underdeveloped economy, etc.), Raeymaeker insisted that

> There is no definite and well-defined hierarchy of states. Small states may in certain circumstances behave as if they were great and vice versa. Whether a state can be considered small, great, or medium, depends on the level of analysis. Thus, a state great or medium on the regional level can be small on the global level…[20]

Analysing the relationship between "powerful states" and "weak states", Singer notes the relational and contextual nature of national power. He explains that states *A* and *B* are to be considered "great powers" compared to the "small state" *C*, if *A* and *B* are able to exert their influence on *C*, notwithstanding that 1) *C* may have enough power to resist their influence; 2) *C* may have enough power to exert some influence on *A* or *B*; 3) *A* may have enough power to exert its influence on *B* as well as on *C*; 4) *B* may have not enough power to exert its influence on *A*. According to Singer, the difference between weak and strong powers is manifested in their specific international roles: more powerful states tend to behave like mentors for less powerful ones.[21]

Bogaturov observed other peculiarities of foreign policy behaviour intrinsic to more and less mighty states—in his wording, "leaders" and "outsiders" of international system. A typical "leader" prefers unilateral actions, initiative diplomacy, offensive behaviour; it seeks to exert greater influence on international processes, forcing the international society to accept its dominant role. Other states, the "outsiders", lack foreign policy ambitions. Contrary to the "leaders", they demonstrate passive, defensive behaviour. The "outsiders" may acquire some political weight only in coalitions.[22] In other words, the difference in their international behaviour is determined by the premise of whether a country has to "take" or can "make" rules and norms of global governance.[23]

Relative definitions of the third type focus on systemic roles of smaller and greater states. Thus, Modelski, speaking in terms of national interests, distinguishes between "great powers" and "small powers" on the systemic level: "great powers tend to have world-wide and small powers only subsystem-centred interests". He notes that the "great powers" impact on international politics is the key to understand dynamics of regional subsystems, which are formed by interactions among "small powers". "Small powers", in their turn, share peculiar characteristics of foreign policy behaviour that allows treating them as a separate class of states opposed to "great powers".[24] For Modelski, this distinction is fundamental for understanding intrinsic laws of international system's functioning and development.

A similar approach is advocated by Young, who distinguishes between two groups of international actors (primarily, nation-states) according to their importance for global international system and their regional subsystems: "global" or "universal" actors are able to exert influence on a global level, while "regional actors" are confined by their respective regional subsystems.[25]

Another analytic prism is offered by Domínguez, who classified unequal powers from a neo-Marxist perspective. According to Domínguez, "major powers" (the core of world-system) are characterised by their ability to lay impact on other states at the global level; "second-order powers" are important because "major powers" have to consider their reaction while implementing their foreign policies; and "peripheral countries" have only marginal importance to "major powers", since they are unable to exert influence beyond their respective subsystems.[26]

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The most detailed classification of states depending on their role in the international system is elaborated by Keohane, who distinguishes four types of them, namely: "system-determining states", "system-influential states", "system-affecting states", and "system-ineffectual states". "System-determining states" (empires and superpowers) play the major role in the formation of global international system. "System-influential states" cannot dominate the international system, but have the capacity to influence its configuration both unilaterally and multilaterally. "System-affecting states" cannot affect international system acting alone, but can exert significant impact on it by working in groups or international organizations. And finally, "system-ineffectual states" are so weak as to become insignificant for the international system; they have to conduct foreign policy that is "adjustment to reality, not rearrangement of it." These four types correspond to "great", "secondary", "middle", and "small powers", respectively. [27]

To conclude this short review of absolute and relative definitions to unequal powers, let's underline some common features, which are noted by the majority of scholars. First and foremost, as Väyrynen fairly emphasizes,

> Small states are not just large states writ small: their objectives, means, and systemic functions are qualitatively different. [28]

Second, we have to keep in mind that the antinomy of "more powerful" and "less powerful" states is relative rather than absolute: the notion of "small power" implies comparison to a greater power, and vice versa. As Panke puts it,

> Size is inherently a relational concept. Big or small only takes on meaning if it characterizes one actor or object *relative* to another in a particular context. [29]

And third, the opposition between "great" and "small" is a systemic feature: since a state may fell into the category of "great" at the regional level, but "small" on the global level, power (dis)parities should be considered only within a certain subsystem of asymmetrical relations. As Long suggests,

> IR scholars should stop defining and re-defining the concept of 'small state' and set it aside as an analytical category. What matters is not 'size,' however defined, but the relationships between states. Instead of talking about small and large states, it would be more effective to think in terms of asymmetry. [30]

Now let's proceed to the analysis of the "buffer system" and "buffer complex" to see how "small powers" may employ systemic asymmetry in relationship to exert influence upon "great powers".

Buffer systems and buffer complexes

A "buffer system" is formed by interaction between adjacent "great powers" roughly equal in their power projection capabilities, and a "small" buffer state. Basic parameters of the buffer system are defined by three factors: geographic proximity, balance of power, and foreign policy orientation of corresponding states. A buffer system exists, if

1. The buffer state is situated between the great powers;
2. There is roughly equal power distribution among the great powers, and, simultaneously, a substantial power disparity between them and the buffer state;
3. There is a rivalry between the great powers over the buffer state, which tries to resist their pressure and retain sovereignty.

A convenient geographic location of the buffer state induces rival powers' aspirations to set control over its territory. From a military point of view, the buffer area constitutes a steady foothold for invasion: placing military bases across the border and conducting military operations from the buffer's territory reduce the risk of human casualties and devastation on the part of the aggressor. In that sense, a buffer state, though unable to infringe anyone's security, may produce grave security threats to the adjacent powers. Moreover, the buffer state may attract rival powers due to strategic oil and gas logistics, abundant natural resources, free space for demographic, economical, and ideological expansion, etc.[31] Here the interests of adjacent powers may collide, but also may correspond to each other, making necessary prerequisites for their mutually profitable collaboration. At last but not the least, the "buffer state" may take on the role of "bridge" between two or more centres of influence, acting as a mediator in great power conflicts and stimulating multilateral cooperation in the spheres of security and international trade.[32]

One of the key features of the "buffer system" is power asymmetry between its elements. According to Partem, within the "buffer system" the rival powers take on the roles of "large states", while the buffer behaves as a "small state", i.e. in a bilateral conflict any of the "large states" may conquer the "small state", while the latter has no chances to win unless supported by an outside power.[33] If this fixed pow-

er distribution changes to the favour of the "buffer state", the "buffer system" will transform into the classical multipolar system, where the former "buffer state" becomes one of the poles. Contrary to that, if the "buffer state" is too weak to justify great powers' lust for annexation, it will provoke aggression and be destroyed.[34] To guarantee the buffer system's stability, the "buffer state" must have a certain margin of safety, which allows withstanding the pressure from the adjacent "great powers". At the same time, rigid logic of the "buffer system" requires that any "great power" must not acquire essential dominance over the other one. Breaking up of the strategic power parity leads to dissolution of the "buffer system"; and otherwise, a prolonged existence of the "buffer system" testifies that the power balance is still functioning.

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Generally, a buffer state is not strong enough to influence the result of great power competition; however, it possesses strategic value that greater powers have to take into account while planning their policies toward one another. Obviously, the existence of an independent and neutral "buffer state" meets the needs of greater powers, which want to be assured that the buffer's territory would not be used to launch an aggression against any of them. It may be argued that from a great power's perspective, to dominate (or to annex) the buffer state is a more reliable (and less risky) way to guarantee geostrategic advantage over the rival power. However, a great power's efforts to extend its influence over the buffer state usually evoke immediate response from the other party, who considers such actions a direct threat to its national security. This is how buffer states survive amidst great powers. But, if this systemic mechanism of deterrence malfunctions or fails, the buffer state may lose its independence or even its sovereignty to a stronger nation.[35]

To protect itself from great power rivalries, the buffer state may become neutralised, i.e. declare its neutrality either unilaterally (by domestic laws), or multilaterally (by international treaties). It may voluntary commit itself not to interfere in great power conflicts or not to host foreign military forces on its territory, though, to be effective, the neutrality of the buffer state must be recognized by other countries.[36] Here comes the dilemma of survival: in order to retain sovereignty, the buffer state must abide by the policy of neutralism and equidistance; on the other hand, as a "small state", which is unable to protect itself, it tends to lean towards a stronger power. This incline may take the form of a military alliance or less formal patron-client relations, and may

vary from symbiosis to exploitation. Anyway, the patron state acquires some kind of control over the foreign (and sometimes domestic) policy of its client, thus infringing its sovereignty. [37] Moreover, the buffer state's tight relationships with one of the rival powers may provoke the other one's unfriendly response, up to a military invasion. Therefore, the buffer state has to balance the interests of adjacent great powers, maneuvering between Scylla of isolation and Charybdis of dependence.

It is a widespread assumption that the foreign policies of rival powers determine the configuration of the "buffer system", while the "buffer state" is unable neither to change these policies nor to resist them. The powers take the majority of key political decisions, sanctioning neutrality or initiating division of the buffer state. However, it must be noted that the buffer state is capable of making some corrections to great power politics within the buffer system. A game theory model of the "buffer system" clearly demonstrates that the buffer state plays a pivotal role in great powers' interactions.

Let's assume that the main objective of both rival powers is constant expansion, until establishing full control over the buffer's territory. It is obvious that geopolitical interests of the powers will collide. Suppose next that each power has to choose between two diplomatic strategies: cooperation (readiness to compromise, giving up one's claims on the buffer territory) and confrontation (readiness for conflict, claiming the buffer territory). Both powers try to predict the opponent's reaction while planning their policies towards the buffer state. Depending on concrete circumstances, each power faces one of four alternatives, more (+) or less (−) acceptable to it:

1. to extend one's control over the whole buffer territory (+1),
2. to prevent establishing the rival power's control over any part of the buffer area by giving up one's own claims (+½);
3. to guarantee one's control over a part of the buffer area, allowing the rival power's control over the other part (−½);
4. to lose the opportunity for controlling the buffer area, giving it up to the rival power (−1).

Obviously, every great power tries to maximize its own gains by minimizing the gains of its rival, yet it has to take into account similar aspirations of the other party. This game is known in the game theory as "the prisoner's dilemma". [38] Here every player can minimise his/her losses by acting egoistically, but he/she may receive a small (but not

maximal) gain if cooperating with the other player. However, if one chooses to cooperate, and the other does not, the former loses everything and the latter hits the jackpot. Therefore, the payoff matrix for this game is as follows:

	State B	
strategy	cooperation	confrontation
cooperation	(+½ ; +½)	(−1 ; +1)
confrontation	(+1 ; −1)	(−½ ; −½)

(State A)

The payoff matrix demonstrates that, depending on great powers' strategies, there are three variants of bilateral interaction:

1. **Mutual cooperation**. This is the optimal variant, when either party cannot guarantee further gains while not worsening the position of its opponent. It can be achieved only when the parties trust one another.

2. **Mutual deterrence**. This is the "minimax" variant, when neither party can achieve better gains if the opponent's strategy does not change. "Minimax" is reached when both parties do not trust each other and try to minimise their maximum losses, if the opponent resorted to unilateral actions.

3. **Unilateral actions**. The variant when one party gains full advantage over the other one, who had not expected the opponent to defect.

The paradox of this game is in its output. The better outcome for both players (+½ ; +½) is unstable, for there is always the temptation for one player to achieve his/her very best outcome (+1) by refusing to cooperate. But, if both parties opt not to trust each other, they will both lose (−½ ; −½), though they receive less harm than in the case when one party is betrayed by the other (−1). The dilemma lies in the fact that "when both parties play it safe by choosing their dominant strategies of non-cooperation, they end up worse off than had they trusted each other."[39]

Taking into account the list of the game's outcomes mentioned above, it is easy to predict that both powers will try to establish their control over the buffer state (the "mutual deterrence" variant). Yet, this interaction output is disadvantageous for both parties, because if the buffer state is eliminated they have to share a common boundary

that decreases their respective security levels. The optimum here, undoubtedly, is the "mutual cooperation" variant, when both parties are assured that the buffer's territory will not be used as a foothold for invasion by the opponent. But if one party agrees to neutralize the buffer state, and the other one breaks the agreement, then the latter will gain decisive advantage over the former (the "unilateral actions" variant). Therefore, trying to get more benefits, the power that agreed to cooperate will lose everything to its uncooperative rival. Considering that control over the buffer is a strategic priority for both powers, each one prefers to share the buffer territory with the other rather than to neutralize it hoping for the other's conscientiousness. Ultimately, when mutual mistrust overcomes bona fide, the rival powers will invade the buffer area and put an end to the very existence of the buffer state.

However, there is the third party in this game, i.e. the buffer state itself, which ultimate interest lies in sustaining its own sovereignty and territorial integrity. Due to its pivotal geopolitical location, which functions as an additional power resource, [40] the buffer state plays an essential role in the strategic triangle. It is the buffer state, who can guarantee its neutrality and equidistance, stimulating mutual cooperation between adjacent powers. Besides, it can somehow resist the great powers' pressure, thus multiplying costs of its possible annexation. Within the buffer system, the buffer state conducts mediator's policies, mitigating the great power rivalry and preventing open collision of their interests. Simultaneously, being aware of its own vulnerability, the buffer state seeks external support, which it can rely upon if great power conflicts escalate.

To protect itself from great power's pressure, the buffer state resorts to a combination of strategies, which Partem identifies as "neutralism", "bandwagoning", and "relying on support of third states". [41] According to Karsh, the neutralist strategy implies a course on sustaining neutrality and equidistance that combines "positive" and "negative" elements. Positive neutralism comprises a series of measures aimed at alleviating fears of the possible damage that may be caused to adjacent powers by the buffer state's neutrality, on the one hand, and steps intended to enhance their interest in the continued preservation of neutrality in question, on the other. Negative neutralism, in its turn, may be subdivided into two elements: the defensive strategy, which implies an attempt to deter the great powers from violating the buffer's neutrality by maximizing its internal strength, and the offensive strategy, which

means the waging of an active and initiative diplomacy aimed at safe-guarding neutrality through the exploitation of the great powers' weak points. [42]

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The bandwagoning strategy constitutes the policy of making alliances with one of the adjacent powers (the strongest one, as a rule) in hope for patronage. Thus patron-client relations are formed and maintained by the weaker party in order to obtain protection. [43] This policy is justified, when the other power conducts a provocative or unfriendly policy toward the buffer, but in the long run it may lead to a conflict escalation and even war between the two great powers. In this case, the buffer state has nothing to do but to rely upon third states, be it an extra-regional great power or a regional coalition of lesser states. [44] The latter case is preferable, because it allows escaping from dependence on a mighty ally.

Any of these strategies, when applied exclusively and consistently, may eventually become disadvantageous, infringing sovereignty or threatening the very existence of the buffer state. Therefore, when it comes to their practical realisation, the buffer state usually employs the tactics of mixing them to reduce inevitable risks associated with a wrong choice. This option is known as "strategic hedging". As Kuik explains,

> Hedging is… an insurance-seeking behavior under high-stakes and high-uncertainty situations, where a sovereign actor pursues a bundle of opposite and deliberately ambiguous policies vis-à-vis competing powers to prepare a fallback position should circumstances change. The aim of these contradictory acts is to acquire as many returns from different powers as possible when relations are positive, while simultaneously seeking to offset longer-term risks that might arise in worst-case scenarios. [45]

In other words, this tactics exemplifies behaviour which is "simultaneously less confrontational than traditional balancing, less cooperative than bandwagoning, and more proactive than buck-passing". [46] Strategic hedging allows for continuous and delicate fine-tuning of the buffer state's relations to the adjacent great powers, ranging from acceptance to rejection of their domination, or retaining neutrality (depending on certain circumstances).

The analytical model of asymmetrical interaction within the buffer system discussed above clearly shows that the role of "small states"

in great power politics, though not decisive, should not be ignored. Given a pivotal geopolitical location, a small state may sometimes essentially correct relationships between adjacent great powers in a way that meets its own needs. Surely, the foreign policy of the buffer state cannot be considered an independent variable, because its resulting strategy is reactive to those of the great powers, and its sovereignty is subject to their amities and enmities. The only chance for the buffer state to survive lies in skilful balancing between its giant neighbours and strategic hedging of anticipated risks, for any awkward move may lead to loss of its independence. Therefore the buffer state has nothing to do but to push the great powers toward adopting the strategy of mutual cooperation.

The same situation is found on the regional level, where a group of "small states", which share common anxieties over certain issues of regional security, can be treated as a collective actor due to striking similarities in their foreign policy behaviour vis-à-vis surrounding great powers. This system of relations is known as the "buffer complex", which is characterized by the so-called "buffer effect". According to Knudsen,

> The buffer effect may be defined as the degree of "resistance" of a buffer area to outside encroachments, superficially observable as the persistence over time of the small states of the buffer system as independent political units… A central point of a strong buffer effect is that neither great power attacks or encroaches on the state in between, because they deter each other. [47]

The buffer effect is strongest at the centre of the buffer complex, blurring at the periphery, where the small states get under the influence or partial control of the opposing great powers. The model of "buffer complex" implies that the influence and control exercised by the great powers decline gradually as the distance from their own borders increases. It means that the buffer effect may "spill over" from the core of the buffer area to the surrounding small states. The stability of a buffer complex "hinges on the success of each small member in resisting unilateral great power pressures." Thus,

> In confronting the surrounding great powers, the small states of the [buffer] complex derive added protective strength from the aggregated effects of mutual relations among themselves. To the extent that they are actively cooperating with each other, and are strongly committed to preserving their inde-

pendence, their protection from great-power control may be enhanced. [48]

Nevertheless, some kind of great power control over the peripheral buffer states is inevitable, since the latter are exposed to direct influence (and pressure) of the adjacent great power, which are less balanced than in the classical trilateral buffer system. However, these states "tend to prioritise their mutual peaceful relations over and above their individual bilateral relations with their respective great powers," thus strengthening the "regional solidarity", because if a buffer state places its patron's interests over the collective interest of lesser powers, the "buffer effect" will shrink that may ultimately lead to elimination of the buffer area and its division among great powers. [49]

The concept of the "buffer complex" has much in common with the "spatial" model developed by Bogaturov. As has been already mentioned above, he distinguishes between the "leaders", which set the rules of the game, and "outsiders", which form the so-called "regional space" whose function is to sanction the leaders' actions. In a highly integrated regional space small states play the role of mediators, acting as a feedback channel between the rival great powers. By supporting or condemning political moves of the leaders, the "space" countries regulate their foreign policy behaviour.[50]

It is worth noting that both the "spatial" model by Bogaturov and the "buffer complex" model by Knudsen underline the pivotal role of the small states, which consolidate their efforts to find the right balance between the rival great powers. From the small states' point of view, great powers' involvement into regional affairs results in projection of their rivalries onto the regional ground, rise of intra-regional confrontation and, ultimately, formation of antagonistic military-political alliances. To neutralise negative impact of great power rivalries, the small states coordinate their efforts aimed at balancing the former's interests. Coordinated policies are worked out at intergovernmental consultations, conferences, and summits, as well as at informal meetings. They are of grave importance to the buffer complex's survival, because "the greater the amount of small-power conflict, the weaker their position in the overall buffer system, and the weaker the buffer effect of the complex itself." To promote regional solidarity, small states have to engage the "renegade" countries, which prefer closer relationships with their respective great power, because their egoistic policies may "trigger demands for compensation on the other great-power side". [51]

These theoretical arguments can be illustrated by contemporary security dynamics in Southeast Asia, where ASEAN (which may be conceptualised as a "buffer area" between three major powers — China, India, and Australia) adopted the policy of "national and regional resilience" to protect itself against any encroachments on its members' sovereignty and territorial integrity. "National resilience" implies that every Southeast Asian country should be strong enough to rebuff potential invasion by military and diplomatic means, while "regional resilience" assumes that all of them together would formulate a common position on regional security issues and support each other vis-à-vis surrounding greater powers (thus enhancing the "buffer effect"). To secure its survival, ASEAN developed a concept of its own "centrality", taking on the role of catalyst for regional economic integration and mediator of great power rivalries. This role was eventually accepted by its greater partners, which benefited from ASEAN-driven peace and stability in the region. Thus, ASEAN established diplomatic mechanisms to promote the great powers' dialogue, contributing to their mutual cooperation.

On the state-to-state level, ASEAN countries employ a variety of strategies to deal with regional and extra-regional powers, which follow the logic of "hedging". Kuik identifies five of them, namely: 1) indirect balancing, aimed "to minimize security risks by forging military alignment and increasing armament, but without directly targeting any power, at least not explicitly"; 2) dominance denial, aimed "to minimize political risks of subservience by cultivating balance of political power in the region"; 3) economic pragmatism, aimed "to minimize economic risks of dependence by diversifying economic links and to maximize economic benefits by pragmatically forging direct commercial links"; 4) binding engagement, aimed "to maximize diplomatic benefits by engaging and binding a big power bilaterally and multilaterally"; and 5) limited bandwagoning, aimed "to maximize political benefits by selectively giving deference and/or selectively forging foreign policy collaboration." This bundle of strategies, situated between pure balancing and pure bandwagoning, helps to reduce risks such as "the danger of betting-on-the-wrong-horse, the hazard of entrapment, the peril of abandonment, the burden of alienation and the liability of corresponding domestic costs."[52]

To sum up, a buffer system (buffer complex) is a kind of asymmetrical relationship, where a small state (or a group of small states) is

exposed to pressure of two (or more) greater powers. Despite power disparities, the weaker side of the inequality is able to exert some influence onto the stronger sides, given their desire to win strategic competition over the buffer. The latter may push the rival powers toward cooperation by guarantying that no one of them will ever control its territory, thus transforming a "win-lose" game to a "win-win" game. However, the buffer's foreign policy is reactive by its nature and depends on politics conducted by the greater powers. To survive within the buffer system, it has to choose from a limited set of strategies ("neutralism", "bandwagoning", and "relying on support of third states") or their mixture ("strategic hedging"). In most cases, the small state's behaviour choice is informed (not to say determined) by that of the rival powers, be it "mutual cooperation", "mutual deterrence", or "unilateral actions".

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Conclusion

This article provides an analytical framework for the study of "buffer systems", which constitute a specific pattern of interstate relations between major and minor powers. The findings of this article can be summarised as follows: "small states" and "great powers" are not ontological phenomena, but international roles, which states take on according to their respective power equations. In general, the "great powers" form and transform the international system, while "small states" support and sustain the resulting international order. Nevertheless, although the interaction between "small states" and "great powers" is asymmetrical by its nature, it does not exclude the possibility of reverse influence by the former on the latter. A game theory analysis has shown that in certain cases a buffer state can affect foreign policies of the adjacent great powers. The paradox of the buffer state lies in the fact that its foreign policy, being reactive to those of the great powers, is crucial for survival of the buffer system as a whole.

It has been found that the foreign policy of a "buffer state" and countries of the "buffer area" (taken as ideal types) follow the same patterns, namely:

a. To neutralise one's territory, resisting great power rivalries;
b. To sustain friendly and equidistant relations with all the great powers concerned;
c. In a conflict between great powers, to ally with the potential winner;

d. Facing aggression by a great power, to ally with its opponent;

e. In order to protect oneself from great power pressure, to unite with other small powers;

f. To solve bilateral issues between oneself and great powers within multilateral institutions dominated by small states.

Small states within the buffer system may exert their influence on greater powers by well-known means, such as making concessions in order to get diplomatic and military protection, threatening to "lean away" in hope to obtain economic preferences, or defining international forums' agenda to secure their political interests. What these diverse strategies have in common, is that they are initiated by the weaker side of the asymmetric relationship and aimed to affect the stronger sides' behaviour. Thus, an abiding patron-client relationship may be mutually beneficial, notwithstanding that the lesser power loses some of its sovereignty to the greater one, if the former comes under pressure of its patron's opponent. And, vice versa, the smaller nation may look for neutrality and equidistance if it feels that its giant neighbours are willing to maintain its independence, or may adopt strategic hedging when their intentions are unclear.

By touching upon the problem of unequal powers' interactions, this article contributes to the extant literature on asymmetry in international relations mainly in a theoretical way, drawing attention to a virtually forgotten sphere of international relations — buffer systems — mostly overlooked by the current IR discourse. It helps to explain the dynamics of contemporary buffer systems, e.g. the one which is found in Southeast Asia, where the ASEAN countries form a "buffer area" between their giant neighbours — China, India, and Australia. By trying to balance the major powers' interests, the buffer states mitigate their rivalries, thus enhancing the regional peace and stability. However, this research leaves some important questions unanswered: To what extent is the buffer model relevant to different parts of the world? Are the unique experiences of buffer states comparable to each other? These questions make the base for further study.

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