

## Small states ‘thinking big’ in a multiplex world: Estonia’s foreign policy

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**Abstract:** The changing world order is ushering in a competition of new ideas and norms. This has already ushered a new era of great power politics, which will present challenges for small states. Small European countries in particular are dependent on open rules-based trade regimes, and institutions like the EU and NATO. To adapt to these developments, small states should increase their activity and flexibility of their foreign policies. This article uses Amitav Acharya’s concept of a multiplex world order to understand the changes influencing small states. Estonian foreign and defence policies will be studied in depth to highlight the challenges and opportunities available to small states in Europe. The article concludes that a paradox is developing for small states: as nationalism rises and global institutions falter, small states will need to be global in foreign and defence strategies. While small states face resource limitations, there are certain smart strategies that can adapt more successfully to the new world order.

**Keywords:** Estonia, EU, multiplex world, NATO, small state, United States

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## Introduction

The 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Brexit, and Donald Trump’s ‘America first’ foreign policy are reminders to small states that the post-World War II world order is in a state of transition. This transition has been ongoing for a decade, or two, but it has accelerated in recent years. This is seen in transatlantic institutions where member states have varying levels of discontent. The UK’s decision to leave the EU and Donald Trump’s America first foreign policy have kept large states at the focus of the conversation. However, it is small states that have the most to lose from transatlantic discontent. Small European countries in particular are dependent on open and rules-based trade regimes, and institutions like the EU and NATO. Trump’s protectionist foreign policy is problematic for small states because it amplifies the populist rise already prevalent in Europe. This is particularly a concern for Estonia which has built its foreign policy around membership in key organisations such as NATO, the EU and the United Nations.

This article focuses on Estonia as a small state. It analyzes its foreign and security strategies using Amitav Acharya’s multiplex world concept. Located at the periphery of the global core, Estonia has an opportunity to explore new openings in non-Western arenas. It also stands to lose the most, given its reliance on the United States as a security guarantor. This article focuses on the challenges, tensions and opportunities that the multiplex world offers

small states. Specifically, it asks: what strategies could a small European ally of the United States pursue in a post-American world? It takes Estonia as a case study and analyzes its foreign and security policies.

Like many other small European states, Estonia has made transatlantic solidarity a cornerstone of its foreign and security policy. The changing world order, which will be discussed at length later on, will create a paradox. As non-Western states, regional organizations, and regional actors increase their influence a foreign policy based solely on transatlantic solidarity will have more limitations and fewer benefits than has hitherto been. As small states seek to adapt their foreign and security challenges, they will need to do more with limited resources.

One's understanding of small state foreign policy is often influenced by the conceptual assumptions of the world order. For example, realist balance of power assumptions give focus to decisions of balancing and bandwagoning. Using the concept of a multiplex world order will provide a needed foundation to better understand and evaluate Estonia's foreign policy. Though the multiplex world order will be discussed in more detail later in the article, the concept of diversity and co-existence with that diversity should be noted. This is true both within the West and in terms of non-Western actors. It is also true in terms of difference sources of influence.

The time frame of the changing world order can be debated. Change has been gradual and different authors will point to different events as marking points. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was one such point. One could also argue that 2016 was another with the UK's vote to leave the EU and the election of Donald Trump. However, from the perception of small states the Georgia conflict in 2008 is the date where small European states begin to see the world differently.

Estonia's foreign policy will be analyzed in two sections. The first deals with Estonia's foreign and security policies within NATO and EU alliance structures. The second deals with global networks and relations. The analysis will focus on the strategies that Estonia has been adopting to deal with the changes in the world order, while also highlighting missed opportunities and current shortcomings and problems.

There are two primary reasons that make Estonia a useful case study. Though the concept of size will be addressed in the next section, it is abundantly clear that Estonia is a small state in all most any category and a very small state in some. In addition, Estonia has built its foreign and security policies upon transatlantic solidarity (Rublovskis, Šešelgyte, & Kaljurand, 2013). Estonia's commitment to transatlantic solidarity has been higher than many other small states, for example it spends over 2% of its GDP on defense. Estonia's efforts have improved its importance within transatlantic institutions (Studemeyer, 2019). When taking into consideration size and transatlantic commitment, Estonia can be seen as somewhat of an outlier. Cases with extreme variables are good options for "broad range discovery goals" (Seawright, 2016). Having extreme values of these variables will better demonstrate the impact the multiplex world order will have on small European states and it will highlight the difficult paradoxical choices that small European states will be faced with. Estonia's foreign policy choices of navigating through the changing world order will be beneficial for understanding what the changing world order will mean for states depending on transatlantic solidarity. In many ways Estonia can also be seen as a best practice case, successfully managing resources and maximizing influence. That said, it is important not to overestimate Estonia's success. Much of Estonia's success was founded in the 2000's, a period before much of the change that this article focuses on. More time will be needed to determine whether Estonia's current foreign

and security choices will be as successful as previous choices. In addition, there are limitations for how much one can generalize. As noted earlier, cases with extreme variables are great for understanding the impact and relationship between different factors. Other small states are not going to have the same extreme variables as Estonia as some will have larger material capabilities and are not as committed to transatlantic relations. In this sense other states will not be able to simply copy Estonia's foreign policy choices. Other states will be able to learn from Estonia's foreign policy choices as they demonstrate the challenges and opportunities that the multiplex world order offers.

The research is based on primary and secondary data including the Estonian National Security concept 2010 and the National Security Concept 2017. In addition, the authors carried out six semi-structured interviews in May-June 2019 with Estonian policy makers from security, economic and diplomatic agencies. Notes were taken both during and after these interviews. Though the interviewees wished to remain anonymous, they provided extensive insights into Estonia's global engagement militarily, diplomatically and economically. Secondary sources are used to provide an overview of the foreign and security policy choices Estonia has made.

Similar ideas and opinions were shared by the interviewed policymakers. They are referred to at times in this text; but they also played a role in shaping the authors' overall analysis. Similar topics discussed in the different interviews include Estonia's relations with allies, Estonia's promotion of digital technologies in its foreign and international economic relations, Estonia's use of limited diplomatic resources, and Estonian relations with African countries and institutions.

The article continues with four sections. Next, a section on small states and the changing world order offers a better understanding of small states as a concept. That will be followed by a section on Acharya's multiplex world order. The following section will clarify the concept of a multiplex world. This will be followed by a section on methods. Next will be the main analysis which will explore the challenges and opportunities Estonia faces in a multiplex world. The article concludes by giving recommendations for smart small state foreign policies for a multiplex world.

### **Small states in the changing world**

Western dominated international institutions have faced a legitimacy crisis for some time. What is different now, is that the legitimacy of key institutions is now being called into question by core Western countries themselves, and not by non-Western countries like China or Russia. At the same time, non-Western countries have increased their influence and created new multilateral institutions like BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Acharya (2017a) notes that these transitions reflect a post-American world. Since many small states depend on international organisations for their security, the diminishing role of Western led institutions is a concern for small states that depend on them.

Many small states have taken a minimalist approach towards foreign policy, preferring to go along with large powers in the name of alliance solidarity. The changing world order is ushering in a competition of new ideas and norms. This has already encouraged to a certain extent a new era of great power politics, which presents challenges to small states. There is extensive literature on how to conceptualize small states. Some authors have focused on material factors such as geographic size, population, GDP (Hey, 2003, p. 2). Others have focused on power (Elman, 1995, p. 171). Thorhallsson (2006) created a list of six different factors that incorporated both material and perceptual aspects: fixed size, sovereignty size,

political size, comprehensive size, perceptual size, preference size (*ibid.*). One of the dominant ways to understand small states is as “the weak part of an asymmetrical relationship” (Steinmetz and Wivel, 2010, p. 6). This provides context without the complexity of adding a long list of different factors. This definition is especially pertinent when discussing change in the world order. When institutions and rules break down, the observations from the Melian dialogue become more relevant; the strong tend to do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. Yet the balance of power, realist-based logic is not the ultimate way of understanding small state foreign policy or in formulating policies that would best serve the interests of small states. Before discussing ways of conceptualizing small state behavior, one needs to understand the nature of the world order. The coming world order should not be understood as a return to a multipolar world order of the 1800’s and early 1900’s but as a new state of being due to globalization.

The changing world order has been a trending topic in international academia for a while. Flockhart (2016) reviews the literature on the changing world order and divides up its approaches into three categories: (1) a multi-polar world order based on balance of power assumptions; (2) a multi-partner world that is based largely on liberalist theories; and (3) a multi-culture world that is based on more constructivist approaches. According to Flockhart, Acharya’s conceptualization of the changing world order fits into the multi-culture world category. This article utilizes the works of Amitav Acharya, and his contribution on the multiplex world order concept in particular. This provides a conceptual foundation to this article, upon which small state foreign policy can be analyzed and understood. Acharya (2017a) argues that rising powers do not want to overthrow the existing order but to become part of it and to shape it steadily in their direction. He calls this a “multiplex world”. Where does that position small states and their constant need for security guarantees?

Many small states in Europe have traditionally relied on the United States as the primary source of security. They have invested in NATO and bilateral relations. What will a post-American world order mean for these small states? For European small states, one challenge in particular will be with increasing tensions and diverging interests between the United States and Europe. The worst-case scenario for small NATO countries is being forced to choose between Europe and the United States. One of the important examples is the vote on the UN General Assembly resolution that took issue with the United States’ decision to move its Israeli embassy to Jerusalem in 2017. This problematic clash will continue in the case of Iran and possibly relations with China. Regarding the Jerusalem vote, many European small states did not side with the United States, but followed the EU’s line and did not support Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Also, the “America first” policy does cause small European states to question if they will continue to be a priority to the United States. Given the trends in transatlantic relations and Western-led institutions, it is likely that there will be more tough choices for small states in the future.

Apart from challenges, the changing world order will create new opportunities for small states. The rise of China and other non-Western countries along with the creation of new institutions and ad-hoc coalitions and networks, mean that there are new openings for small states to influence international politics. What strategies should small states adopt to take advantage of these opportunities? This article will explore the challenges and opportunities that the changing world order has for small states.

### **Multiplex world order**

Acharya (2017a) states that the multiplex world order “is not a singular global order, liberal or otherwise, but a complex of crosscutting, if not competing, international orders and

globalisms.” The multiplex world order is made up of regional worlds, which are “dynamic configurations of social and political identities... that form complex webs of power” (Acharya, 2014, p. 80). Sources of power and influence are also more divers and today “currencies of power compete and coexist (Missiroli, 2015, p. 2). In addition, the power dynamics of the regions is a bottom up approach focused on ideas and legitimacy rather than a top-down hegemon model (Acharya, 2017a, p. 81). The rise of regional organisations and the development of inter-regionalism promote diversity of leadership (*ibid.*, p. 105). In other words, regions are dynamic social constructions. This enables the construction of the regions (Acharya, 2017b).

The multiplex world order is different from the concept of multipolarity, which was more accurate for understanding world orders in times past. The current world order is made up of many important actors, not just powerful states. This includes robust regional institutions. (Acharya, 2017a). Non-state actors are more prevalent along with a rise in civil society (Missiroli, 2015). Economic interdependence is global and more complex than state-based trade relations are. In addition, the problems the order faces are complicated and are not easily solved by power relations between states (Acharya, 2017a).

From a global governance perspective, fragmentation is taking place (Acharya, 2017b). The fact that fragmentation is happening does not mean that old forms of governance dissolve. Co-existence is rife (*Ibid.*). Fragmentation can be seen as a new normal, one where there are shared spaces and intersecting paths (Missiroli, 2015). One example of co-existence lies in the governance of human rights where there are regional courts, in addition to the ICC (Acharya, 2017b).

Acharya offers several recommendations relevant to Western states. First, they should recognise that global power shifts are here to stay and that they should not expect the United States to drive multilateralism. In addition, they should embrace pragmatic globalism and the complex and unfolding fragmentation in global governance (*ibid.*).

Acharya most often draws a comparison between the West and others, recognising the impact, agency and position of non-Western states in the world order. Acharya's approach rejects the realist dichotomy of 'rule makers' versus 'rule takers' (e.g. Schenoni and Escudé, 2016). Instead, he highlights the ability of others to change norms and rules (Acharya, 2004). This article defines small states as the weak part in an asymmetrical relationship. By rejecting the realist dichotomy of power politics, we can move beyond traditional approaches to small state foreign policy such as free-riding and balancing. Acharya's framework allows us to better understand the opportunities and impact of small states in a complex world.

### **Estonia's foreign and security policies in a changing world order**

From 1918-1940, Estonia was an independent state, a member of the League of Nations. It had close ties with Finland and other Baltic States. The Soviet Union's annexation of Estonia in 1940 and the following decades under Soviet rule created the foundation of Estonia's foreign policy and national identity. Lennart Meri summed this up the best when Estonia joined NATO “Estonia will never be alone again” (Valitsus.ee, [Government of Estonia] 2006). When Estonia regained its independence in 1991 it identified itself as a European country and made significant steps to integrate itself into European institutions. Although, joining the EU and NATO in 2004 was the most important step, cooperation and coordination took place long before 2004 and efforts to further integrate Estonia continued after 2004 (Rublovskis, Šešelgyte, & Kaljurand, 2013, pp. 59-65).

Regarding Estonia's foreign and security policy, a longstanding principle has been solidarity with the United States and a reliance on NATO for a security guarantee. Estonia viewed Russia as a potential security threat long before the 2014 Ukraine conflict (Raik 2016). The importance of NATO membership for Estonia is in part due to the way it perceives Russia. For the last several decades Estonia has put forth effort to convince the United States that it is a provider, not just a consumer of security. This was demonstrated with the 2003 Iraq war when Estonia sided with the United States and other Eastern European countries in supporting the war and sending troops to participate in the "coalition of the willing". Since 2003, Estonia made consistent efforts to be a producer of security. In 2014, former United States president Barack Obama visited Estonia to show solidarity and political support to Eastern European allies. In his speech, he lauded Estonia as a model ally (The White House, 2014). Obama specifically noted Estonia's participation in missions in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as paying 2% of its GDP towards defence (*ibid.*) Estonia's strategy to prove itself a reliable and useful ally to the United States, has caused it to be labeled by some as a "super Atlanticist" (Wivel & Crandall, 2019). Yet in addition to this foundational principle, Estonia has been quietly pursuing a multiplex foreign policy within the EU and NATO by building up political capital with France and Germany.

### **Enhancing relations within the EU**

In addition to the United States, Estonia has made efforts to improve relations with Germany and France, the dominant powers within the European Union. In Estonia's National Security Strategy 2010, it states that the development of bilateral relations with NATO and EU member states is a way of increasing Estonia's security. With the unfolding of Brexit and Donald Trump's 'America first' foreign policy, relations with France and Germany will be as important as ever to European small states. McNamara (2017, p. 97) notes the importance of developing alternative networks as a means of maintaining (and not replacing) Transatlantic security relations in the Trump era. He suggests three levels of networks: one between Nordic and Baltic states; a wider European security and defence cooperation; and a larger network including both Europe and the US. In theory, this would increase trust between member states and change security dynamics, potentially avoiding factions from forming; e.g. 'old Europe vs new Europe' or Europe vs the United States. The 2017 National Security Strategy states that increased solidarity in the EU and NATO is one of Estonia's key priorities. A recent study on maximizing influence in the EU came to a similar conclusion and suggested that Estonia could improve ties with Germany and France (Janning & Raik, 2020). This is all the more vital with Brexit and one way of doing so is to partner with other countries that have better connections with France and Germany such as Finland, Sweden, Netherlands and Belgium (*Ibid.*). Estonia's efforts to invest in relationships with other key European allies extends beyond security and military policies. The two relationships this section will focus on are Estonia's relations with France and Germany. Estonia has emphasised security and defence policies with France and economic and social policies with Germany.

Efforts to improve relations with France follows a similar strategy to those it used with the United States. It has provided symbolic and political support at a level that merits appreciation. In recent years, Estonia has participated in missions that are of importance to France. For example, in 2014 Estonia sent 50 troops to the Central African Republic as part of an EU mission placed within a larger French force (ERR, 2014). In Estonia, some asked what our troops are doing in Africa (Eesti Päevaleht, 2014). According to the interviewees, The reason did not have much to do with the Central African Republic, but rather relations with allies. The strategy is to be the model ally and show solidarity, which is necessary if Estonia were to ever need the help of allies (Diplomaatia, 2014).

Estonia has also participated in several missions in Mali. This includes the UN backed mission Minusma, the EU backed mission in Mali EUTM, and the French backed mission BARKHANE (Käitsevägi, 2019). Of those, the mission that has taken the most resources is BARKHANE, where a force of 50 soldiers operates. In interviews with officials involved with the Mali missions, it was repeated by multiple officials that the impact of participation goes a long way in improving relations with France. It was noted specifically that Estonia's contributions were recognised and appreciated by politicians in Paris.

Estonia has also given political support to important French initiatives like PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation). This happened during Estonia's six-month EU presidency in 2017, which came six months earlier due to Brexit. PESCO is a remarkable step forward towards building a European defence framework. "PESCO foresees the possibility of a number of EU member states working more closely together in the area of security and defence in a binding and permanent framework" (EEAS, 2019). 25 EU countries have agreed to join PESCO, though not Denmark and the UK.

Estonia was also one of ten countries to joined France's more ambitious European Intervention Initiative which this time included Denmark and the UK. This initiative "is intended to bring together willing and able nations in order swiftly to tackle emerging crises in Europe's neighbourhood" (Lebrun, 2018). This initiative would improve burden sharing regarding crisis-management in the European neighborhood, in particular its southern regions (*ibid.*).

France has shown a continued interest in pursuing a European defence strategy of autonomy which is not only demonstrated in the previously mentioned initiatives but also escalatory rhetoric when French President Emmanuel Macron called NATO "brain dead" (Rose, 2019). By showing its commitment to France and to security agendas important to France, Estonia is investing political capital with another key ally. In a 2018 meeting between the Jean-Yves Le Drian France's minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs and Sven Mikser, Estonia's then minister of foreign affairs, France thanked Estonia for the contribution in Mali and noted its political significance. It was also noted that the European Intervention Initiative will enable even closer ties between France and Estonia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

Germany is another country with strategic importance to Estonia. Similarly, Estonia has made significant efforts to be a model ally and to support causes important to the German leadership. The two most significant examples have been Estonia's efforts to join the Eurozone and to support European Stabilization Mechanism, as well as its willingness to take on quota refugees.

When Estonia joined the Eurozone in 2011, it was in the aftermath of the global financial crisis which had hit Estonia hard. Estonia decided to implement harsh austerity measures to ensure that budget deficits would remain low to meet Eurozone criteria. As the leading economy in Europe, the Eurozone crisis was especially significant to Germany. Estonia's extraordinary efforts improved Estonia's image and made it a model of fiscal responsibility (Siarkiewicz, 2011, p. 4). Estonia was the 'anti-Greece' (Kasekamp, 2013, p. 108). As a member of the Eurozone, Estonia also decided to fund the European Stabilisation Mechanism and approve the bailout packages for Greece. At the time, wages, pensions and GDP per capita was significantly higher in Greece than Estonia. As former Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves stated "...the sheer ludicrousness of us bailing them out was quite a difficult feat to pull off in Parliament in Estonia... It was one of those cases where the Estonian Parliament showed responsibility and dedication to the European Union at tremendous political cost" (Ioannou, 2017).

During the refugee crisis in 2016 a similar pattern emerged. The Estonian parliament decided to accept 550 quota refugees and was in large part a constructive part of the policy making process. Despite some debate, consensus was reached in stark contrast to Hungary, Poland and others who strongly resisted the refugee sharing policies. Though Estonian domestic opposition was against refugees, Estonian policy makers again noted the principle of solidarity in the decision to take on refugees (ERR, 2015). In 2017 the Estonian government noted that “Estonia is a part of Europe and should therefore understand the complexity of the migration crisis. In solving this crisis, Estonia should remember its moral commitment to help those in need and remember that Estonia has become strong enough to deal with this challenge” (Valitsus [Government of Estonia], 2019a; translated by the authors).

German-Estonian relations became noticeably closer and warmer after the Crimea annexation by Russia. For example, Germany’s then foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Tallinn every year from 2014-2016 (Välisministeerium [Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs] (2019); and German Chancellor Angela Merkel visited Estonia in 2016 to discuss the future of the EU (Deutsche Welle, 2016). During the visit, cooperation in digital affairs was also discussed, with Estonian granting Merkel e-residency (Tambur, 2016).

Efforts to invest political capital with both Germany and France have come at a significant cost to Estonia, but can be seen as successful in improving bilateral relations. In a world with a resurgent Russia and a post Brexit EU, strong relations with France and Germany are more important than ever before. Both France and Germany continue to be important NATO allies who participate in the policing of Baltic air space and other aspects of NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence. In a show of strengthening ties with Estonia, in 2019 France sent 300 soldiers, tanks, and other military vehicles to Estonia as part of those efforts (Cole 2019). Having strong European powers committed to Estonian’s defence adds an extra layer of protection and provides additional deterrence to potential aggression. In addition to benefits in hard security, improved relations could help Estonia gain support for economic, infrastructure, or cultural interests within the EU. It seems that Estonia’s efforts to be seen as a model ally by Germany and France is resulting in better relations.

### **Estonia going global**

Despite limited resources, Estonia has been relatively active in terms of global engagement. In the 2010 National Security Strategy it states that security is a result of international cooperation. The 2017 National Security Strategy states that to maintain a world order based on international law and the UN charter is a key priority. Efforts to increase transatlantic solidarity has been one underlying force that has pushed Estonia’s global engagement. As noted, Estonia was a participant in the Iraq and Afghanistan missions and in African missions. Afghanistan has remained a priority country in terms of development assistance. In addition to building solidarity in transatlantic relations, Estonia’s traditional foreign and security policy focus has been the Eastern Partnership (EaP). This is evident in Estonia’s growing development cooperation framework with Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova and their designation as priority development cooperation countries. Estonia’s support for the EP was also a way to keep the EU focused on the East (Jyrkunas, 2014). Estonia’s dedication to the EaP is evident by the fact that it runs the only Eastern Partnership Centre inside the EU (Made, 2011). Estonia also made the Eastern Partnership a priority during its presidency of the European Council of Ministers.

The most significant arena for Estonia’s global engagement has been the United Nations, where Estonia served as a member of the UN Human Rights Council in 2013-2015 and is a rotating member of the UN Security Council in 2020-2021. During its time in the UN Human



Rights Council, one of its key goals was to increase the profile of human rights both domestically and internationally (Seilenthal, 2014). Estonia underwent a significant campaign to gather support for its bid, in particular efforts in Africa. President Kaljulaid called Estonia's successful bid to join the UN Security Council a "historical step" that offered "another layer in our protective shield". (ERR News, 2019b).

One of the driving forces behind Estonia's global foreign policy has been to promote a three-pronged cyber agenda: e-governance, cyber security and internet freedom (Crandall & Allan, 2015). This builds on Estonia's long-term efforts to brand itself as a cyber-expert, or as is commonly noted e-Estonia. Estonia is also active in the Open Government Partnership Initiative and the Online Freedom Coalition (Välisministeerium [Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 2014).

When looking at geographic regions an increase in engagement with several areas such as the Arctic can be noticed. Climate change has made viable shipping lanes in the Arctic a possibility increasing the importance of the region to many global players. As the most northern country not on the Arctic Council, Estonia began a campaign to become an observer member. That plan was first cast aside when the EU took more interest in the Arctic Council (ICDS, 2017). In 2019, Estonia changed course and decided to apply for observer status in 2021 (Valitsus [Government of Estonia], 2019b).

The Middle East is another region which is seeing more Estonian engagement. After originally deciding that Estonia would not participate in the Expo 2020 Dubai due to a lack of funds, the government reconsidered and committed €2 million to cover participation (Postimees, 2018). Estonia hopes to double exports to the Middle East due to participation in the Expo. As part of this strategy, Estonia also announced the opening of an embassy in Abu Dhabi to better ensure success with the Expo and to promote its expertise in e-governance (ERR, 2018; Debusmann, 2019). For Estonia, this is a significant development: an embassy is the ultimate symbol of resource allocation for a small state.

As noted in the previous section, Estonia has become more involved in Africa. In addition to the mentioned military missions, Estonia has also had significant engagement with other countries. This is particularly interesting given the fact that Estonia only has one embassy on the continent. In the months prior to Estonia being chosen for the UN Security Council in 2020-2021, there was a robust campaign aimed at developing relations with key African countries and leaders. The president of Estonia was especially influential on her presidential visits to several African countries including Benin, Senegal, Algeria, and Ethiopia, the headquarters of the African Union. According to the interviewed experts, President Kaljulaid's visits had a significant influence in creating positive relations with the heads of states of many African countries. After Estonia had secured the UN Security Council seat for 2020-2021, President Kaljulaid stated that the relationships built will be maintained and relations will continue with African partners (Office of the Presidency, 2019).

Estonia has also been active in Asia, coming up with an Asian strategy and ordering expert analysis already since 2011 (Käkönen et al., 2011). Even with the strategy, there does not appear to be complete consensus among the political elite on how to deal with the rise of China and the role of interests and values in Estonia's foreign policy towards China. Support for Tibet, the acceptance of 5G technology from Huawei, and the Hong Kong democracy protests have been key discussion points among domestic elites and political parties in recent years. Regarding 5G technologies, Estonia decided to side with the US and signed a memorandum of understanding that would prevent Chinese technologies from entering the Estonian market (Hankewitz, 2019). With that step, Estonia clearly drew a line between

economic and security relations vis-à-vis China. According to Sven Sakkov, director of ICDS, the primary foreign policy think tank in Estonia, communications technology is a matter of national security “because the 5G network is not just the next communications network; it is where our entire lives will be located in the future” (ERR, 2019a). Pressure from the United States was also a factor that helped move this from an economic to a security issue. This symbolised how Estonia chose not to remain neutral but to take a stand towards China.

One example of Estonia’s engagement in Asia is trade relations with Japan. In 2014 when the Ukrainian conflict led to sanctions between the EU and Russia, the Estonian dairy industry was hit hard, obliging a search for other markets. In a matter of months, agreements with Japan were signed, replacing Russia as a dairy market. The speed of negotiations was made possible due to previous engagement in CO<sub>2</sub> quota trading between the two countries (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2015).

This is not to say that Estonia has engaged everywhere or been successful in that engagement. Engagement with Latin American countries remains limited. Estonia closed its embassy in Brazil in 2016 for financial reasons, even though it was the only embassy in that continent (ERR, 2016). This means that Estonia does not have any embassies on the continent.

Though Estonia is often seen as a strong supporter of the United States and overly focused on its territorial defence, this section has highlighted the global engagement Estonia has undertaken. While much of the engagement is not high on the foreign and security policy priority list, it is significant and has brought real results. The next question will critically analyze some of Estonia’s shortcomings and put together trends and strategies small states can follow as they engage with a multiplex world.

### **Multiplex foreign policy for a multiplex world**

Small states will need to be proactive to ensure that their voice is heard in a multiplex world. Small state literature has a rich history of exploring and conceptualizing how small states can maximize their influence. Realist frameworks focus on small state decisions on balancing and bandwagoning (Walt, 2009). Liberal approaches focus on the role of institutions in maximizing small state interest (Lamoreaux and Galbreath 2008). Constructivist approaches focus on norms as a way small states can increase their influence (Ingebritsen, 2002). Shelter theory highlights a small state’s need for military, political and economic support, and that alliance choices are influenced by cultural and social relationships (Bailes, Thayer & Thorhallsson (2016). Joseph Nye’s smart power concept (2009), which discusses the strategic use of soft and hard power, is especially relevant to small states. One article analyzed smart small state policies within the EU (Grøn and Wivel, 2011). The article suggests three strategies, norm entrepreneur, lobbyist, and self-interested mediator. Though the strategies were specific for the EU, there were certain principles applicable to many small states outside of the EU as well.

The multiplex world order will complicate things in several ways. Most conceptualizations of small state foreign policy are between states with limited flexibility. The Multiplex world order is far too complex with too many actors and ideas to be able to explain with balance of power. Traditional alliances and relationships will not be enough to maximize influence and provide security. Small states will still be seeking shelter, security, and influence, but they will not be able to get it all from the same place or the same actors as was in the past.

A multiplex world implies that small states would need to invest in multiplex foreign policies to ensure additional guarantees. A multiplex foreign policy presumes the managing the coexistence of diverse relationships and maximizing influence in shared spaces. For Estonia

and other transatlantic small states, it will mean developing and deepening relationships both within and outside the transatlantic region. This will require strategic thinking: a task which small states have (up to this point) largely outsourced to larger states. Small states have significant budget and human capital restraints which make a multiplex foreign policy difficult to implement. This means that small states will have to be strategic with the allocation of resources. The development of niche capabilities is likely a good option for small states to pursue.

Developments in Estonia offer many lessons to small states. Estonia has developed a niche strategy as a cyber-expert and actively promotes e-governance, an open internet and cyber security. This has enabled Estonia to make significant contributions in promoting cyber security within NATO circles. Estonia has also seen success in exporting e-governance practices to development cooperation countries such as Georgia and Ukraine. Digital competencies and development cooperation have been a point of departure for engaging with African countries as well. Estonia has also had a significant voice in promoting the open internet as well as forward thinking ideas such as e-residency and data embassies.

Unfortunately for small states niche capabilities will not matter all the time and everywhere; but the development of niche capabilities will mean that they will matter some of the time in many places. Not all niche strategies are created equal. For a small state to matter, it will need to be competent and its capability will need to be valued by the international community. Establishing capabilities and expertise that can be based on success on the domestic level would be a good place to start.

Coming back to the point of diversifying relations, this should be done with caution. For Western small states that are members of the EU and that are dependent on the transatlantic partnership, the usual trend has been to link foreign and defence policies. One aims to support the other and eventually they both aim to ensure the survival of the sovereign state as a primary goal. This has worked well as long as the interests and priorities of the United States and the EU align. It appears that now they are on a somewhat diverging path. Trump's decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and to withdraw from the Iran nuclear pact are two examples. Trump's unilateral decisions to withdraw forces from Syria and to act against Iran have put heavy pressure on its European allies as they were not included in the planning of those decisions. Based on observations of both the multiplex world order and Estonia's foreign and security policies, small states should stick to their military and defence policies: when it comes to high politics or hard power politics, there is no substitute for NATO and good allies. Despite the wave of populism and EU skepticism, membership in the EU should also be seen as high politics not low politics or soft power politics. Diversification and deepening of ally relations within the EU and NATO is certainly a positive development.

The key differences for Western small states in a multiplex foreign policy will be most visible in low politics where global opportunities are available. Niche strategies, ad hoc coalitions, and investment in networks are all strategies that small states should actively pursue. Of course, contributing to permanent multilateral organisations is a continued strategy; but the multiplex world order will mean that international politics will be taking place outside institutions as well.

Engagement for its own sake will bring no returns; but strategic engagement can make small states matter in a turbulent time. New coalitions and networks should not undercut NATO or the EU. Nevertheless, it should be said that engagement will not be easy. Tensions between the U.S. and Iran would seem to be a classic case for a small state to sit on the sideline and wait

for larger states to play it out. Estonia's seat on the UN Security Council is an example where to be constructively engaged on the issue.

Small states will also have to manage the coexistence of competing ideas and values. This will not be an easy task. The coexistence of diversity can perhaps best be seen with relations with Poland. On the one hand Poland is a key NATO ally who shares a similar vision of hard security with Estonia. Poland's skepticism of Russia and reliance on the USA fits well with Estonia's vision for military security in the region. On the other hand, the current leadership of Poland does not share a vision with Estonia when it comes to the European Union and to a certain extent liberal democratic values.

In addition, small states could prioritise low politics more. Even the wars in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate the importance of trade relations, strategic communication, and good governance. These all matter a lot in a moment of crisis. When looking at the potential security threats to small states, there is a large, ambiguous operating space between military and political confrontation. With the development of new technologies and power shifts, it may be time for small states to demilitarise their foreign policy. This would include prioritising foreign policy goals that go beyond territorial sovereignty. It would mean finding more resources for diplomatic engagement: embassies, development assistance, cultural exchanges and the like. According to the interviewees, business diplomacy should remain a key priority for Estonia as businesses need state support in certain regions, such as Africa. Prioritising and diversifying relations in low politics will not solve all the problems for small states; but it will put them in a position to take advantage of opportunities that would further their national interests and play a more constructive role in global politics.

## Conclusion

Given the gravity of the global changes and the tensions within transatlantic relations more efforts need to be placed on a multiplex foreign policy. Despite the rise in nationalism and protectionism, the level of interdependence between countries and regions is past the point of no return. This will mean that there will always remain a need to cooperate on certain issues. Developing niche capabilities will ensure that, at least on some issues, small states will be taken more seriously by larger states. This will also enable small states to be more effective in coalition building, both within international organisations and ad hoc coalitions. By investing in networks, small states will be able to ensure that key national interests are represented with others who share those common interests. Small states should be especially bold in engaging with new global partners in areas of low politics (mainly, trade and culture).

In an era of change, transition and confusion, the stakes are high for small states. With great power politics returning to international politics, small states need more strategy and smart allocations of resources. While the world turns its focus on big states, what the world needs is for small states to start thinking big.

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