

## The Role of Small Powers in the Outbreak of Great Power War

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### Abstract

International politics is generally viewed as a game played by the great powers, in which the lesser powers have no substantial say. In trying to account for variation in the stability of the international system most of the academic literature focuses therefore exclusively on great powers. But a review of the qualitative arguments and the quantitative evidence presented within this polarity paradigm shows that an unequivocal link between polarity and system stability is difficult to establish. Going beyond polarity, this study argues that the role of small powers deserves closer scrutiny in order to gain a better understanding of the pillars of a stable international order. The role of small powers in either upholding or undermining the stability of the international order is important for a variety of geographic, political, strategic and economic reasons. This study examines whether small powers contribute positively or negatively to the polarisation of the international system; whether small powers facilitate or undermine great power cooperation; whether power differentials between great and small powers enable command-and-control or pose a moral hazard; whether small powers are buffer zones inhibiting conflict or stepping stones in great power conflict; and whether small powers are safety valves or fire igniters. Acknowledging that the role of small powers is indeed significant, the real question is what mediating factors determine the nature of its role. This study argues that two characteristics of the international system are essential: the tightness of alliance systems and the stability of the hierarchy. Two case studies of the multipolar period 1815-1914 and the bipolar period 1945-1989 support the contention that the role of the small power is conducive to great power peace in a stable international hierarchy with fluid alliance systems, but destabilising in an unstable international hierarchy with tight alliance systems.

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### Introduction

One major debate has dominated the causes of war research field since its inception. This debate concerns the relationship between polarity and great power war or, to put it differently, the relationship between the structure of the international state system and its stability. Although many political scientists assume that this relationship in fact exists, they disagree on its nature. Where some consider a unipolar system to be stable and peaceful (Organski, 1968; Gilpin, 1981; Thompson, 1988), others argue that peace and stability are features of a multipolar system (Deutsch and Singer, 1964; Morgenthau 1967; Kaplan, 1957) while there are also those who ascribe these characteristics exclusively to a bipolar structure. (Waltz, 1979; Snyder and Diesing, 1977)

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An examination of the literature over the last fifty years shows how the research on the peacefulness of certain system structures evolved from general ideas illustrated by anecdotal evidence to empirical testing, eventually leading to a deeper analysis of system structures going beyond general denominators of multi-, bi-, or unipolarity. But a review of the qualitative arguments and the quantitative evidence also shows that an unequivocal link between polarity and great power war is difficult to establish, if not non-existent.

Quantitative research-results diverge on all three systems and different scholars using different methods come to different conclusions. (Geller and Singer, 1998; Small, and Singer, 1982; Levy, 1983, 1985; Bobbit, 2001; Spiezio, 1990; Thompson, 1988; Houweling and Siccama, 1988; Wayman, 1984; Wilkenfeld and Brecher, 2000; Bueno de Mesquita, 1981) If there is no unequivocal connection between polarity and system stability, we should look for other variables that explain the variation of great power war.

Generally speaking, international politics has always been viewed as a game played by the top dogs, a game in which the lesser powers have no substantial say. The great powers have constitutive as well as distributive power: they determine the rules of the game, they fight the wars and they decide who gets what, over the heads of the other powers. The congresses of Westphalia (1648), Utrecht (1713), Vienna (1814), Berlin (1878), Versailles (1919), and Yalta and Potsdam (1945), when the (victorious) great powers set the rules for the new state system, are illustrative in this regard (Bobbit, 2001; Albrecht-Carrié, 1973). Small powers, in turn, are characterised as helpless pawns in the grand schemes of the great powers. As a result, a rich body of literature on the role of great powers in international relations exists, while the role of small powers has only been marginally scrutinised. Except for Manus Midlarsky (1988) and Paul Schroeder (1986), the role of small powers in the stability of the international system and the outbreak of great power war is either touched upon in passing or completely ignored. This paper argues that small powers do play a significant role in the outbreak of great power war or the maintenance of great power peace, and are therefore relevant in accounting for the stability of the international system. Whether this role is stabilising or destabilising is mediated by two characteristics of the international system: the tightness of alliances and the stability of the hierarchy.

This paper is organised in six sections. The first section provides definitions of the terms great and small power. The second section presents the variety of ways in which small powers play a stabilising or a destabilising role in great power relations. The third section posits that two variables mediate the nature of its role. The fourth and fifth sections offer two case studies to illustrate that claim. The conclusion in the sixth section recapitulates, outlines several paths of future research and reflects on the significance of the results of this study for the wider small power studies discipline as a whole.

### **Great and Small Powers**

Since both in popular and academic discourses the terms great and small powers are used intuitively and loosely, it is necessary briefly to reflect on these terms for the purposes of this paper. There is ample and longstanding debate on the precise conceptualisation of great powers (see, among others, Organski, 1958; Modelski, 1974; Waltz, 1979; Mansfield, 1993). This paper follows Levy in defining great powers as states that play a major role in international politics in security related issues. Military power is, albeit important, not their sole defining characteristic. Great powers set themselves apart through their continental/global rather than local/regional interests, their capability to project military power beyond their borders, their willingness to defend their interests more aggressively, their disproportionate engagement in alliances and wars, other powers perceiving them as a great power, and through their identification as a great power by an international congress, organisation or treaty. (Levy, 1983: 10-19) These serve as a useful guide to identify great powers across different historical eras. Less straightforward, it seems, is the definition and measurement of a small power. Should one consider population size, gross domestic product, territorial size, natural resources, military strength, or are there any other fundamental pillars of power that could be considered?

Most of the authors speak of small states rather than small powers. Rothstein (1968) defines a small state as a state that cannot provide for its own security and must rely on the aid of other states. He describes three features of a small state: it relies on outside help for its security, its space of maneuver is limited and it has very little chance of correcting any

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potential mistakes it may make, and the political leadership consider its weakness as a given which is unalterable through actions on their part. Keohane (1969) considers a state small if its leaders realise that in acting alone they will not have any significant impact on the system. Vital (1967a) proposes a more straightforward definition: he defines small powers as states that have less than 10-15 million inhabitants for advanced countries, or less than 20-30 million inhabitants for underdeveloped countries. The main problem with his definition is that it is time-bound – it does not apply to centuries other than the twentieth century – and that the relationship between population size and national power is by no means unequivocal. For example, in the seventeenth century The United Provinces – presently, the Netherlands – is generally considered to be a great power, although its population size was rather small. Baehr (1975) concludes in a review from the foregoing authors that if so many states fall under the common denominator of small state, it loses its value as an analytical tool. Christmas-Moller (1983) argues that there is a distinction between the clarity of the definition and the power of explanation of the concept. In a similar vein, Knudsen (1996) argues that the concept small power should be used as a focusing device, rather than as an analytical tool. Wiberg (1996) contends that from a security perspective, nearly every state in the world system is small. In a book written four years later, Vital (1971) changes his definition of small powers from a static one – as he describes it – to a more dynamic one. He distinguishes between intrinsic and contingent capabilities of small powers. The former refers to for instance the number of inhabitants, while the latter is closely related to the international political situation, illustrated by the tremendous importance of Vietnam to the US in the 1960s. Mouritzen (1996) defines a small state as a state that has to adapt to the changes that great powers bring about in the state system. Great powers are able to influence the state system; small states have to adjust to these developments.

This paper suggests that it is not the size of the unit *per se* that matters; it is the relationship in which the smaller state stands to great powers that is relevant and if there is a substantial power disparity between the two, it is valid to speak of a small power. This paper prefers to speak of the term small power, rather than small state, because the former expresses the importance of power disparity above unit-size. The small power concept is defined loosely

on purpose as an overly rigid definition of the small power concept is not appropriate for a long range study because size and military power vary from era to era. Having defined what is meant by the term small power, this paper will turn to the role small powers play in the outbreak of great power war and the stability of the international system.

### **The Role of Small Powers in the Stability of the International System**

*“The strategic functions of small powers emanate from various factors, political, geographical, economic and military which are not always easy to identify or disentangle, and a change in the constellation of power may fundamentally alter the position of a small state.”* (Mathisen, 1971)

The different factors that account for the strategic function of small powers are sometimes intertwined. For the sake of conceptual clarity, I will try to distinguish the multiple roles that small powers may play although there may be an inevitable overlap between these roles. Small powers are of great importance to the stability of the international system and in many ways they play an essential –and often underappreciated– role in either facilitating or undermining peaceful great power relations and as corollary to that, the stability of the international system as a whole.

The following five subsections examine whether small powers contribute positively or negatively to polarisation of the international system; whether they facilitate or undermine great power cooperation; whether power differentials between great and small powers enable command-and-control or pose a moral hazard; whether small powers are buffer zones inhibiting conflict or stepping stones in great power conflict; and, finally, whether small powers are safety valves or fire igniters.

#### ***Small Powers and Polarisation of the International System***

Does the presence of a large number of small powers serve as an inhibiting factor in the polarisation of the international system? Polarisation refers to the phenomenon that states in periods of rising tension form two or more opposing blocs. When the system is polarised, alliance systems are tight. This paper considers the system to be polarised when the states in the system are divided into opposing blocs, which is the case when the great

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powers conclude alliance agreements solely with the allies of their allies and there exist few to no crosscutting ties at all between these different blocs. One argument contends that the sheer existence of a large number of small powers lowers the probability of polarisation of the international system by promoting fluid alliance systems since the defection or inclusion of small powers from an alliance will – due to their small size – not dramatically affect the overall balance-of-power in the system. Raymond and Kegley (1994) describe the implications of tight or fluid alliance systems in multipolarity. They stress the significance of two types of international norms: *pacta sunt servanda* versus *re sic stantibus*. They contend that tight alliance systems that are prevalent under *pacta sunt servanda* produce a heightened probability of war, which is supported by empirical research on alliance systems and war. (See also Vasquez, 1993: 158-177), whereas looser alliance systems may be more associated with a *re sic stantibus* ethos. The presence of a large number of small powers in the international system may thus partly account for why certain alliance systems are tight and why other alliance systems are fluid. As Midlarsky (1988) argues with respect to the nineteenth century state system in Europe, “the presence of a large number of these sovereign entities could allow one to ally, say with Austria while another allied with Prussia.”

Another line of reasoning argues that it is in the best interest of small powers to align themselves as quickly as possible with one of the great powers on the basis that they possess so little power and are not able to withstand any of the great powers independently. As a result, an international system populated with a greater number of small powers polarises more rapidly than one with fewer small powers. The inclination of small powers to bandwagon as a result of their striving for self preservation destabilises the balance-of-power by contributing to the further distortion of an equilibrium, which in turn threatens the stability of the entire international system. (Sens, 1996: 87) Recent history is rife with such examples. For example, the central European states that belonged to the former Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact, including the Baltic states, Hungary, Poland and Rumania, that switched sides and aligned themselves with the United States and with NATO, shortly after the end of the Cold War, accelerated the unipolar moment of the United States in the 1990s. (Gardner, 2004) The struggle over spheres-of-influence between

the great powers will therefore not be less fierce, let alone non-existent in an international system with an abundance of small powers. Contested zones remain contested zones and those territories that are of political, strategic or economic value will still be subject to intense rivalry. In this second line of reasoning, it is not the number of small powers in the international system that matters, but their geographical location in this system. Territories that comprise resources will for instance be subject to intense rivalry (Klare, 2001). In the first twenty years of the Cold War – when the threat of the Cold War turning hot was perceived to be imminent – a significant number of small powers existed outside Europe; the great powers, however, valued principally the small powers inside Europe because of their political and strategic value. (Trachtenberg, 1999)

#### *Small Powers and Great Power Cooperation*

Are small powers conducive to good and stable relations between the great powers or do they undermine what would otherwise be peaceful and stable relations? The view that small powers are conducive to good great power relations rests on the assumption that the existence of independent small powers produces the possibility of positive sum-games between the great powers, which may come at the expense of smaller powers. Their existence could salvage great power relationships powers which may use them as tradeable goods, as ‘chips at the table’ in order to settle the outcome of a great power war and/or prevent a new one. This was for instance observed in the partition of Poland in the eighteenth century (1772, 1793, 1795) between Russia, Austria and Prussia, but is also illustrated by the piece of paper at which Stalin and Churchill divided the European continent following the Second World War. (Trachtenberg, 1999)

Small powers may contribute to the building of confidence between great powers whose relations are often characterised by mutual diffidence and historically rooted animosity. In due course, the great powers can generate trust and build a working relationship. An independent, neutral small power may remove an area from great power competition. If it is in the interest of great powers for an area to be peaceful and stable, for instance for economic purposes, they may decide to leave it alone as long as the other power(s) are willing to do the same. Early twentieth century Persia serves as an example: Britain and

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Russia divided Persia in separate spheres-of-influences in 1907 with a neutral zone in the middle of the country serving as a buffer between the two expanding great powers. The Russians and the British commonly supervised the neutral zone. In practice they exploited the country economically, but at the same time it was a vehicle for cooperation. (Mathisen, 1971: 115) Schroeder describes how the small powers of the nineteenth century system as not only served as buffer zones (see below) between the great powers but “also linked them by giving them something in common to manage.” (Schroeder, 1986: 17) The Netherlands, belonging to the sphere-of-influence of Prussia and Britain, linked these two powers. During the early stages of European integration after the Second World War the small powers of the Benelux (Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg) performed this function, which facilitated greater cooperation and further integration between the great powers. (Helmreich, 1976) Midlarsky (1988) refers to the neutralisation of Vienna in 1955 as a means of building trust between the United States and the Soviet Union, which, down the road, buttressed more difficult forms of cooperation, such as the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) talks and agreements.

The counterargument to this rosy view of the role of small powers holds that instead of serving as vehicles for cooperation, they pose an insurmountable obstacle to peaceful and stable great power relations. Small powers often serve as a continuous source of irritation and conflict between great powers, a source that for a variety of reasons cannot be easily drained. Taiwan as a recurring flashpoint in Sino-American relations is an example in case. Small powers may form an immediate cause of conflict between the great powers if a great power expects a domino effect if it abandons its small power allies. This was part of the containment strategy of the United States in the contested zones during the Cold War and led to at least one great power war in the twentieth century (i.e., the Korean War). Furthermore, the role of small powers is destabilising on the basis of the law of large numbers and conflict-of-interest and information- and monitoring problems that present themselves in n-player games. More players within an alliance produce a greater variety of interests and, as a result, more conflicting interests. John Vasquez (1993: 191) reports Cusack and Eberwein’s review of 634 twentieth-century militarised disputes in which they found that “while about three-fourth of these disputes were dyadic, they are among the

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least likely to escalate.” Non-dyadic militarised disputes, which involve more than two players, are by inference more likely to escalate. Similarly, the process of bargaining is more complicated in a  $(n + 1)$ -player game than in a  $n$ -player-game. (Snyder and Diesing, 1977: 440-450) With regards to information- and monitoring problems, verification and enforcement of treaty compliance in larger  $n$ -games becomes more difficult, which may produce free-riding small powers that have a smaller vested interest in the terms of the treaty being carried out. The proliferation of nuclear weapons and arms technology to Libya, Pakistan, Iran and North Korea serves as a contemporary example in case.

***Power Differentials: Command-and-Control or Moral Hazard?***

Do power differentials between great power and small powers contribute to a stable international system as they enable great powers to enforce the rules of the international system and getting vassal states to toe the line? Or do small powers despite these power differentials still act on their own accord and, instead, serve as moral hazards?

One side of the argument runs that great powers, daunted by the prospect of great power war looming on the horizon, will dictate the terms of the world order while taking care not to give in to the, in some cases irresponsible, demands of small powers. They do not get involved in lower-level-conflict between small powers. Out of a general war-weariness and fear for the contagious effects of war, they command small powers to abide by the rules of the system and to refrain from any acts-of-aggression against other states, so the reasoning goes. The 1956 Suez-crisis is a salient illustration in case with the United States forcing France and Britain to halt their attacks while the Soviet Union ordered Russian pilots operating Egyptian fighters out of the area. (Calvocoressi, 1991; Luttwak, 1999)

The counterargument holds that large power differentials will not enable great powers to hold the small powers within their bloc in line. Small powers, on the contrary, may pose a moral hazard to great powers. They may behave recklessly in the international arena, whether large power differentials exist or not, which is only reinforced by the notion of moral hazard. The underlying idea is that small powers act recklessly on the hubristic

assumption that an allied great power will come to their assistance when they get themselves in trouble. This may especially apply to situations in which small powers are able to dictate the agenda of the great powers, which is an often-cited argument against the peaceful effects of small powers on the international system. The outbreak of the First World War comes to mind (see section four). Further back in history, the Second Peloponnesian War provides another example in case, with Potidaea, forced by Athens to join the Delian League, asking Corinth for assistance, which in its turn appealed to Sparta. This eventually led to the outbreak of the second Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C, when Sparta marched an army into Attica. (Thucydides in translation by Schwartz, 2003)

*Small Powers: Buffer Zones or Stepping Stones?*

Are small powers excellent buffer zones that prevent the eruption of great power conflict or are small powers, instead, stepping stones and as such accelerate great power war as great powers move in the direction of the least resistance? One well-established school-of-thought asserts that small powers play an essential role in the balance-of-threat in their function as buffer zones. This school holds that adjacent great powers pose a geostrategic threat to each other and that proximity itself amplifies the security dilemma since none of the parties can ever be certain that measures implemented by the opponent serve defensive purposes only, or that they may have offensive purposes as well. (Jervis, 1978) One way of overcoming the problems associated with the security dilemma is the creation of a so-called buffer state. A buffer state is an independent, neutral piece of territory which is intended to serve as a “fender or bumper” (Mathisen, 1971: 63) Buffer states are often fabricated by great powers in order to keep the balance-of-threat and thus the balance-of-power intact. (de Spiegeleire, 1997; Greenfield Partem, 1983; Morgenthau, 1967: 170-171)

The establishment of a buffer state is primarily intended to close off a route that could otherwise be used to invade the opponent, while the buffer state itself does not pose a security threat to the great power. Moreover, direct contiguity of great powers increases the chances of armed clashes between them. There is ample research on the eruption and incidence of war that finds evidence of war-contagion (Vasquez, 1993: 123-152), which refers to the fact that neighboring states historically tend to fight more wars with each other, in comparison to states that do not share borders. Accepting this evidence, it follows

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logically that the chances that great powers fight wars against each other will be reduced when they do not share borders.

The Russians and the British tried to establish a buffer zone in Afghanistan. In 1895 they agreed that the Pamir region, a large mountainous area along the territory over what are now the republics of Tadjikistan and Kyrgyzstan, would separate the two empires from bordering directly on each other. Thailand is another example, whose territorial integrity was preserved as it was established as an independent buffer in the 1880s when Great Britain advanced from Burma and France from Laos. A third example is observed in the buffer zones of the Low Countries created at the Congress of Vienna. From 1815 until 1870 and from 1871 until 1914 they contributed to peace between England, France and Prussia/Germany. Metternich, Austria-Hungary's famous nineteenth century Foreign Minister referred to the Low Countries:

Placed between France and the Northern Powers, they belong to the peaceful and conservative line of central and intermediary powers, which lean on one side on Austria, to the other on England, and whose constant tendency must be to prevent France and Russia from weighing on the European center and destroying the equilibrium whose balance they hold in their hands. (cited in Schroeder, 1986: footnote 7)

Another school-of-thought holds that buffer states, on the contrary, are destabilising and are "consistent bones of contention" (Mathisen, 1976: 63) between great powers. Mathisen refers to the traditionally uncommon alignment between Germany and Russia in the first years of The Second World War. These countries shared a common interest in destroying the political arrangement of the Versailles settlement which provided for the existence of a number of small powers. This was contrary to the interest and the wishes of the other great powers, and as an inevitable consequence, the small powers in the system, turned out to be zones of contention, rather than safe guardians of peace.

In addition, a buffer state will only be preserved or created by great powers if the great powers value the above described benefits that its existence would deliver; if they foresee great problems in a division of the country; and if there are no objects within the buffer state that are of interest to one of the parties. Its establishment or preservation should

deliver greater benefits than its division or unilateral occupation by one of the parties which would lead to the war they seek to avoid. Otherwise it is likely that the great powers will try to seize control of the buffer state.

In a similar vein, precisely because of their strategic position, small powers or regions form an accelerator of great power war because great powers want to get hold of the location of the small power for several reasons. For instance, the small power may occupy an important strategic position, prompting great powers to engage in pre-emptive intervention in order to keep other powers from gaining an advantage. (Mearsheimer, 2000; Van Evera, 1984) Small powers may form an advanced base or a stepping-stone in the grand strategies of expansion of the great powers. Small powers are also used by great powers for reconnaissance operations, refueling and storing military materiel, as well as for the launching of offensive operations. (Posen, 2003) Opposing great powers may resist the use of small powers in their proximity and opt to counteract such actions by military means. Historical examples are provided by the Korean peninsula which was conquered in 1895 by the Japanese as a stepping base both for further expansion into China and as a stronghold against the Russians (Borthwick, 1998). After the Second World War, the Korean peninsula continued to be a place of contention and from 1950-1953 the US fought a war over control of this strategic foothold against China. In the containment strategy of the US, the Korean peninsula also formed (and continues to form) a strategic barrier of defence.

Small powers may also lower the threshold for great powers of going to war. States prefer to move in the direction of the least resistance. When they are surrounded by great powers, their inclination to do so will be constrained and most likely contained, but if they are surrounded by small powers their equation will be drastically altered. (Van Evera, 1984) The Second World War serves as an example in case, with Hitler starting by invading and/or incorporating Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Had he been surrounded by stronger states – so the reasoning goes – the circumstances would not have permitted him to start his expansion so easily.

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Small powers are coveted by the great powers for the presence of resources and/or passageways. Great Britain occupied Egypt in 1882 in order to secure the Suez-canal. At the same time Egypt was used as a stepping-stone for military action in the Middle East. This led to a renewal of the rivalry with France and the temporary end of the Anglo-French Entente Cordiale established after the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian war. Panama, was established as a free state in 1903, and carved off Colombia, to secure safe passage through the, at the time yet-to-be-finished, Panama Canal. This reflects on the role of small powers in the international system. For long under US tutelage – the Panama Canal, for example, fell under US jurisdiction – Panama seemed to be attaining a greater degree of independence in the 1970s, but when the policies of Panamese president Noriega were at odds with US interests, the US invaded the country to push him out of office. (Art, and Cronin, 2003) Since there are no other great powers located in the Western hemisphere, Panama was and is no zone of contention.

***Small Powers: Safety Valves or Fire Igniters?***

Can small powers serve as safety valves, as means to relieve the pressure in great power relations, or are they rather instruments that cause, inflame, or accelerate processes of escalation? Small powers may function as the battlegrounds in which the great powers fight out low-level conflicts, without risking an all-out war. As such, they perform the role of safety valves. Great power rivalry is catalysed and large-scale war – i.e., great power war – is avoided. Vietnam is an example of a small power where the US fought a low-scale war against what it perceived to be the forces of a world communist bloc. At the same time, it did not engage the Soviet Union in direct combat. Warring states in the periphery received their weapons from the two competing great powers during the Cold War. Crucial to the safety valve being able to work properly, however, is whether great powers are able to decouple geographical areas. One of the pillars of the relative stability of the multipolar system in Europe in the period 1815-1878 was the decoupling of colonial wars from European wars. (Schroeder, 1986) A similar process was observed during the Cold War. Europe was considered to be the main battlefield and neither party was willing to make any concessions with regards to small powers shifting alignment. Each power threatened full-scale war if the other party would seek to alter the existing arrangements on the

European continent. Outside Europe in the periphery, however, wars were fought indirectly through third parties.

Opponents of the safety valve thesis, argue that small powers are in fact 'fire igniters' for a variety of reasons which have been covered at length in previous sections. The Berlin and the Cuban Missile crises, which in the end did not erupt into full scale violence but came dangerously close to doing so, are often referred to in these regards. (Trachtenberg, 1991; Allison and Zelikow, 1999)

The above-mentioned arguments and the examples drawn from history establish that small powers may play an important role in the stability of the international system, both in positive – as well as in negative ways. But concluding that small powers indeed play a role in the stability of the international system, the real question is what mediating factors determine the nature of their role.

#### **Mediating variables: alliance systems and hierarchy**

This paper argues that two characteristics of the international system are essential: the tightness of the alliance system and the stability of the hierarchy.

#### ***Fluid or Tight Alliance Systems***

Alliance systems refer to alliances – both formal and informal – between states. Tightness refers to whether they are static and strong, or dynamic and fluid. The tightness of alliance systems is closely interrelated with the polarisation of the system. Polarisation refers to the phenomenon that states in periods of rising tension form two or more opposing blocs. When the system is polarised, alliance systems are tight. One way to operationalise the polarisation of the system – and hence the tightness or the fluidness of alliance systems – is provided by Wayman (1985). Wayman measures the polarisation of the system by the ratio of actual poles to potential poles among the great powers in the system. He uses a scale that ranges from 1.00 for the maximum number of poles (no blocs) or no polarisation, to 0.00 when there is cluster bipolarity or complete polarisation. He finds that where in 1870 there were no blocs (a score of 1.00), in 1905 the system was polarised (a score of 0.50), which it

remained until the onset of The First World War. As explained earlier, for the purposes of this paper the international system is considered to be polarised when powers are divided in opposing blocs, while there are few to no crosscutting ties at all between these different blocs.

On the one hand, the disappearance of small powers has an effect on the polarisation of the system, since great powers will value the dominion over small powers highly. Small powers become scarce goods pushing great powers to actively try and gain dominion over the small powers that are left either through outright usurpation or by entering into alliances with them. This will contribute to the tightening of alliance systems. In tight alliance systems dominion or influence over small powers whether that be for geo-strategic, political, economic or symbolic reasons, is of the utmost importance to the great powers, which is even greater if small powers are located in a zone of contention. The loss of a small power as an ally will be perceived to be detrimental to the great powers' interests leading to a higher probability of conflict between great powers over dominion over the small power. It thus seems that the nature of the role of small powers in the outbreak of war is mediated by the tightness of alliance systems. When the system is heavily polarised and characterised by a high degree of alliance tightness, there is a heightened probability that small powers will have a destabilising effect on great power relations and the peacefulness of the international system. Vasquez (1993: 253) writes in his review of research on alliances and the outbreak of world war – a specific type of great power war: “Midlarsky’s(1988) and Sabrosky’s(1985) analyses make it clear that once an alliance system is polarized, world war is likely to emerge by a contender coming to the aid of an ally.”

On the other hand, when there is an abundance of small powers in the system, it is more likely that alliance systems will be fluid. Consequently, the chances that the system will polarise are smaller. Polarisation and alliance tightness are thus interrelated. The disappearance of small powers has an impact upon the tightness of alliances and the polarisation of the system in general. When there are few to no small powers left at all, it is likely that alliance systems are tighter and the competition for small powers fiercer. As a result, the role of the small power will be destabilising rather than stabilising.

*The Stability of the Hierarchy*

The stability of the hierarchy across different systems of polarity is the second mediating factor that determines the role of the small power. Every system of polarity is characterised by a specific international order which consists of rules buttressed by a certain hierarchy. In a stable hierarchy, no state will try to challenge the existing international order. But when the power of one or several of the great powers is in decay and their influence is waning, the arrangements of the international order are perceived to be open to adjustment. When the stability of the hierarchy is in disequilibrium the role of the small power is destabilising in different ways. Empirical evidence from the power transition program shows that states whose power is rising, so called rising challengers, are more likely to enter into war with the former hegemon. (See, among others, Organski, 1958; Thompson, 1988; Houweling, and Siccama, 1988; Kim, 1992).

Taking a broader view, this paper posits that in addition to a conflict between the former hegemon and its challenger being more likely, once a great power is in decay, its international order will be challenged by other powers – both great and small – in the system. In a power vacuum small powers form a prey for (rising) great powers who will seek to advance their position, possibly picking up a fight with the former great power. But not only great powers will seek to take advantage of the waning influence of a great power in decay: small powers will hold similar aspirations, perceiving a window-of-opportunity for either emancipation or realignment. However, in the process of taking advantage of the powers that, although crumbling, still be, the probability of conflict increases. Such conflict can initiate at a lower level between two small powers, inviting the involvement of great powers which may seek to defend former prerogatives or future gains. It is thus more likely that a conflict between great powers fought over a small power will escalate into a great power war. This is in line with the evidence produced by quantitative research into the origins of great power war. To quote Geller and Singer (1998: 119) at length:

If the capability advantage of the leading state is small or is eroding, other states may choose to attempt to alter the hierarchy. The challenges may be directed against the leading state or lesser states within an increasingly unstable international order. (...) As the international system moves from a high concentration of resources in the leading state toward multipolarity (power diffusion), lower-order conflict among the set of

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major states will become increasingly probable, due to the weakening of the principal defender of the hierarchy.(.) This suggests that the erosion of the system-level power structure links lower-order wars among major powers to system shaping global wars. (emphasis added)

Once such a system shaping global war is fought, a new system comes into place. The new system is imposed by the victors of the great power war or the dominant great powers and usually this brings the system back in equilibrium, since these post-war arrangements reflect the newly established power configuration. In sum: a stable hierarchy is characterised by an international order which is a reflection of the underlying power configuration while no powers perceive the arrangements of the international order to be open to adjustment. The role of the small power is similar across different uni-, bi- or multipolar systems. Whenever a great power is losing influence, the role of the small power can be destabilising when the small power seeks to emancipate or realign itself and/or when other powers seek to advance their own position.

These considerations render clear the conditions that determine the nature of the role of the small power. First, alliance tightness affects the nature of the role of small powers. Second, when a great power is declining, and there is a gap between its status and the real power it can actually project, other powers will want their piece of the pie. Amidst an unstable hierarchy small powers may form a prey for great powers, or small powers themselves may act recklessly. In an international system that is also characterised by tight alliance systems this could drag great powers into war with each other. This line of argument leads to the following hypothesis:

The role of the small power is conducive to great power peace in a stable hierarchy with fluid alliance systems. But in an unstable hierarchy with tight alliance systems, the role of the small power is destabilizing which in some circumstances may lead to the outbreak of great power war (see variants i and iv in Figure 1).

<u>Variant</u>	<u>Alliance systems</u>	<u>Stability of the hierarchy</u>	<u>The nature of the role of the small power</u>
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i	fluid	stable	promotes great power peace
ii	fluid	unstable	ambiguous
iii	tight	stable	ambiguous
iv	tight	unstable	promotes great power war

Figure 1. The mediating effect of alliance systems and the stability of the hierarchy on the role of small powers in the outbreak of great power war.

The effects of the variants ii (fluid alliance systems and an unstable hierarchy) and iii (tight alliance systems and a stable hierarchy) on the role of the small power are less straightforward compared to the other two variants, but they do reflect on the interaction effect of the two mediating variables.

On the one hand, in an unstable hierarchy with fluid alliances structures, any potential destabilising effects of a small power's actions are dampened due to the fact that fluid alliance systems prevent the international system from becoming polarised over a conflict involving a small power. It is less likely that small powers will drag great powers into war with each other as the great powers' hands are untied: they will prefer to look for new alliances rather than risk a great power war over a small power. This considerably lessens the likelihood of the outbreak of great power war involving a small power.

When the hierarchy is stable, on the other hand, the effect of tight alliance systems on the role of the small power is significantly smaller. In a stable hierarchy, it is less likely that great powers will infringe upon territory of small powers within the spheres-of-influence of other great powers. Although in theory small powers may still engage in reckless behavior, the sheer fact that the overall hierarchy is stable will make it less likely that they do so, thereby lessening the risks posed by moral hazard. In a stable hierarchy there are no windows-of-opportunity within which other powers perceive that they should act or miss out on any gains, while great powers have firmer control over the actions of small powers.

Variant ii and variant iii do not seem to determine the nature of the role of a small power but they do enhance our understanding of the mediating variables. Not only do they show that each of the two mediating variables has an independent effect on the role of the small power, but, more importantly, they render clear that it is only a specific combination of the two that determines the role of the small power. Otherwise the effect of one of the two is undone by the effect of the other.

Recapitulating, the role of the small power is conducive to great power peace in a stable hierarchy with fluid alliance systems (variant i), but destabilising in an unstable hierarchy with tight alliance systems, sometimes leading to great power war (variant iv). (see Figure 2)

<u>Alliance system</u>	<u>Stability of the hierarchy</u>	
	Stable	unstable
fluid	promotes great power peace	
tight		promotes great power war

**Figure 2.** The role of small powers in great power relations and interaction effects with alliance systems (fluid/tight) and the stability of the hierarchy (stable/unstable).

In a stable hierarchy with loose alliance systems the role of the small power promotes peace between the great powers. But in an unstable hierarchy where the alliance systems are tight, the role of the small power is destabilising and may promote great power war. The empirical evidence supporting these contentions comes from a qualitative analysis of one period of multipolarity (1815-1914) and one period of bipolarity (1945-1989).

**The role of small powers in multipolarity: 1815-1914**

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Between 1815 and 1914 Europe experienced a relatively peaceful era, certainly compared to earlier eras. Jack Levy (1984: 129) finds the following: “There have been a disproportionately large number of years without wars in the post-Vienna period (about 60 percent of the years are without war) compared to the continuity of war in earlier times (when only ten percent of the years were without war).”

The Congress of Vienna succeeded in establishing a postwar settlement involving all the great powers, including the defeated power France. Following the Congress of Vienna a multipolar system was established, with an international order buttressed by a stable hierarchy. Conflicts were managed through consultations between the great powers, who did not allow the escalation of conflicts over small powers. Continental Europe was – by silent agreement – insulated from conflicts taking place outside Europe. The system was not polarised and the hierarchy was stable largely due to the fact that there was no gap between the actual power wielded by the great powers and the arrangements of the Vienna congress that supported the international order. Except for the Crimean War (1854-1856), the Prussian-Austrian (or the Seven Weeks) War (1866) and the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), no great power wars were fought between 1815-1871. Moreover, the battles fought during these three wars were all of short duration and of relatively small magnitude, compared to the great power wars of the eighteenth century and the world wars of the twentieth century. (Singer and Small, 1982: 82-99, 102-103)

After the German unification in 1871, however, the stability of the system started to wane. The enlargement of German power significantly affected the stability of the hierarchy. The removal of the small South German states from the center of Europe had a range of serious implications. Germany started pulling more weight in the international arena. France and Germany bordered directly creating a security dilemma which only the creation of the European Union would solve in the twentieth century. German re-unification prompted Austria-Hungary to shift its focus to the east in addition to re-igniting a race for colonial possessions in the 1880s. Initially the decoupling of geographical areas provided for the possibility of positive-sum games in which territories could be traded off against each other. However, after the world ran out of stock of small powers in the 1890s, conflicts over small powers outside Europe started to spill over to Europe which, for example,

manifested itself in the Moroccan crises of 1905 and 1911. These negatively affected great power relations within Europe and prompted the conclusion of alliances across the continent. Against the background of a shift in focus on the part of the European powers away from the colonial world and back to Europe, small powers in the Balkans started stirring up turmoil, spurred on by the growing disequilibrium between status and actual power wielded by two declining great powers – Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. This inevitably led to external quarrels with other powers seeking to gain or hold on to holdings, and internal conflicts of nations that attempted to establish a state of their own. States started to challenge the existing international order within the context of a hierarchy that was becoming increasingly unstable. Bulgaria, for instance, declared independence in 1908, the same year of the Bosnian crisis, in which Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, which – to no avail – was vehemently protested by Serbia. The Italo-Turkish war and the Albanian uprising in 1911 conveyed to other nations at the Balkans the existence of a window-of-opportunity to gain greater independence which contributed to the outbreak of the Balkan Wars in which they united against the Ottoman Empire. (Albrecht-Carrie, 1973) The conclusion of alliances across the entire system – from the Triple Entente between the United Kingdom, France and Russia to the Central Powers with Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy (which would cross over to the Triple Entente after the outbreak of the war) – marked the polarisation of the international system in which the loss of allies was perceived to bear grave consequences. This provided the context for a small power being able to drag great powers into a lower level conflict.

When the reservoir of small powers in the periphery was exhausted, the fight over spheres-of-influence between the great powers became fiercer, and their focus re-shifted again to the European continent. In this particular case, the Balkans remained a contested zone being subject to intense rivalry over a period of decades with at least three of the great powers (the Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary and Russia) possessing considerable vested interests in the region and a number of small powers craving for independence. The events at the Balkans contributed to the further worsening of intra-European relations which would culminate when Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austria-Hungarian throne, was assassinated on Serbian soil by a member of a Serbian nationalist terrorist organisation.

His assassination prompted Austria-Hungary to present Serbia with an ultimatum containing a long list of demands that was rejected by Serbia. This set in motion a series of events that resulted in the outbreak of the First World War. (Taylor, 1954; Howard, 2002; Stevenson, 1991) Against the background of very tight alliance systems, other great powers perceived that they could not afford to stand by and watch how the situation at the Balkans would evolve. A conflict that started out involving a declining great power and a small power could not be localised and eventually came to encompass all powers in the international system.

The First World War raises severe doubts with respect to whether large power differentials enable great powers to hold smaller powers within their bloc in line as neither Germany nor Russia were able to control Austria-Hungary and Serbia respectively. Instead of serving as a vehicle for cooperation, the small power Serbia on the contrary formed an obstacle to well-functioning relationships of the great powers. It may also be argued that great powers on both sides of the conflict expected a domino effect if they would give up on Serbia. It thus becomes clear that while small powers in stable hierarchies and fluid alliance systems may be conducive to great power peace, in an unstable hierarchy with tight alliance systems they can lead to the outbreak of great power war (see Figure 3).

<u>Alliance system</u>	<u>Stability of the hierarchy</u>	
	stable	unstable
fluid	small powers 1815-1870	
tight		small powers 1871-1914

**Figure 3.** The role of small powers, 1815-1914.

**The role of small powers in bipolarity: 1945-1989**

At the European continent a tight alliance system was in place soon after the Second World War. The states were divided into a Western and an Eastern bloc within the extremely

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polarised system that characterised the first decades of the Cold War. In Europe, the major zone of contention, the position of the small power Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was considered to be vital by both sides. The US perceived the potential loss of the FRG as being detrimental to its interests and considered this possibility as only the first step in a process that would eventually lead to communist domination of Europe. The Soviet Union feared that the FRG, once it would regain its strength, would threaten Soviet dominion over the German Democratic Republic (GDR), its Eastern counterpart. Both sides expected a domino-effect if the GDR would reunite with the FRG and open up to the West (which in fact happened after 1989). The FRG – a small power in comparison to the US and the Soviet Union – played a destabilising role in the relations between the great powers during the first eighteen years of the Cold War. At multiple occasions it was the immediate cause of conflict with at times a real risk of escalation to (nuclear) war. Only when the great powers managed to reach a settlement over the status of the FRG, did the Cold War enter a new phase. The conflict over the FRG shows how the variables of tightness of the alliance system and stability of the hierarchy had a decisive impact on the destabilising nature of the role that the FRG played in the relations between the two great powers. Only after the power configuration underlying the stability of the hierarchy was balanced did the FRG no longer play its destabilizing role in the relations between the great powers. Once a settlement was reached on the FRG, a wide array of small powers still existed outside Europe that acted as safety valves in which the US and the Soviet Union could fight each other without clashing directly. The existence of these small powers, outside the main zone of contention, played a role in the preservation of a general peace between the two great powers during the remainder of the Cold War.

In the first two decades of the Cold War, the stability of the hierarchy was in disequilibrium. The status of the FRG and US commitment to its territorial integrity was unclear, which was perceived by the Soviet Union as an opportunity to challenge the status quo. Although initially the US possessed a nuclear monopoly, it was strongly outmatched in conventional military terms at the European continent by the Soviet Union, following its demobilisation after the end of the war. Additionally, there was uncertainty whether the US would be willing to fight a (nuclear) war over Europe if it would ever come to

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armed conflict, while it was clear that Western European states would not be able to withstand a Soviet attack by themselves. Although the Soviet Union successfully tested its first atomic device in 1949, the US held on to a strategic nuclear superiority until the 1960s. The presence of Western military forces in West Berlin – an island in the middle of the GDR – was also perceived to constitute a threat to Soviet interests. The Berlin question turned out to be a recurring and particularly troublesome issue in the relationship of the two great powers. (Trachtenberg, 1999)

This first came very visible to the fore at the occasion of the Berlin blockade of 1948-1949. During this episode the Soviets blocked off all access roads to Berlin, prompting the US to organise the so called Berlin airlift in order to continue to supply the Western zones of the city and remain independent from Soviet Union. Over a decade later, in 1958 and in 1961, the Berlin question resurfaced once more, when the Soviet Union issued ultimatums stating that all Western states would have to evacuate Berlin. At both occasions Western states did not fulfil the demands stipulated in these ultimatums but it did create international crises of sorts. Each time the Soviet Union threatened to unilaterally alter the status of Berlin, the US called its bluff and held out. It communicated clearly that it sought a mutual recognition of the status quo in return for which it was willing to keep the FRG non-nuclear. Significant power differentials enabled the US to let its small ally the FRG toe the line. The Soviet Union, although dissatisfied with the status quo, backed off time and again, in the face of overwhelming US nuclear superiority. But once the Soviet Union more fully developed its nuclear capabilities, it would soon come to match those of its opponent. It is in this perspective interesting to note that the US promise of a permanent conventional military presence shortly preceded the attainment of nuclear parity by the USSR. (Freedman, 1998) This coincided with a general settlement of the rules-of-the-game. Once a de facto power equilibrium was in place which was also clear to all parties, the stability of the hierarchy was no longer challenged. Once the hierarchy was stable, the small power FRG no longer played a destabilising role in the relations between the great powers until the end of the Cold War.

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During the second period of the Cold War, the alliance system in Europe did not witness any changes. Outside the major zone of contention, a looser alliance system existed. Some states were allowed to change sides but this caused no major conflict between the great powers. In some instances, however, the loss of a small power was seen as detrimental to the interests of the great power. US involvement in Vietnam is an example. Nevertheless, this did not lead to a direct war between the US and the Soviet Union, nor did it in the case of Afghanistan. The great powers were successful in insulating major zones of contention from conflicts in the periphery. Due to the existence of large power differentials, no small power was able to dictate the policy of one of the great powers and drag them into a war with the other. The hierarchy was stable due to the fact that the two great powers each possessed a nuclear arsenal allowing them to destroy the other power in a second strike. In addition to the existence of a nuclear stalemate, they both recognised each other's core spheres-of-influence, and, after the settlement of the German question, only infringed upon each other's territorial interests in the periphery. The existence of a wide array of small powers outside the major zones of contention allowed for lower level conflicts to be fought without thereby directly threatening the stability of the hierarchy. At multiple occasions one great power fought forces supported by the other great power (both Vietnam and Afghanistan are examples in case), while such lower level conflicts never escalated into a direct confrontation between the great powers.

It thus becomes clear how during the first period of the Cold War in the context of an unstable hierarchy with tight alliance systems, the FRG played a destabilising role in the relations between the great powers. When the hierarchy was stable during the second period of the Cold War, the FRG no longer played this role. The alliance system at the European continent remained very tight, but outside this major zone of contention the alliance system was more fluid. Here, the existence of a number of small powers in a stable hierarchy, performed the function of security valve; the great powers could fight each other indirectly, without threatening each other's vital interests. In the fluid alliance systems that existed at a regional level, the role of small powers was conducive to great power peace (see Figure 4).

<u>Alliance system</u>	<u>Stability of the hierarchy</u>	
	stable	unstable
<b>fluid</b>	small powers outside Europe 1963-1989 (Vietnam, Afghanistan)	
<b>tight</b>	small powers in Europe 1963-1989 (FRG)	small powers in Europe 1945-1963 (FRG)

**Figure 4.** The role of small powers, 1945-1989.

Once the Soviet Union could no longer live up to its power status, against the background of a considerable disequilibrium between its actual power and its status, it produced an unstable hierarchy and a rapid and unexpected demise of a once very powerful empire. But rather than the outbreak of great power war, the world witnessed the peaceful demise of the Soviet Union. Its swift dissolution in an unstable hierarchy, was followed by the return of small powers waging war at the Balkans. The US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 – which it claimed it was an incident – notwithstanding, the great powers did not allow the Balkan wars to escalate into a great power war, as had happened three quarters of a century before. This may have been the result of an international system that was not severely polarised: apart from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), no tight alliance systems were in place. It may be preliminary inferred that when the hierarchy is unstable, but alliance systems are fluid against the background of a non-polarised international system, the role of the small power will not be as destabilising as it would be when the alliance systems in place are tight. The Balkan wars of the 1990s nonetheless show how the role of small powers comes back to the foreground, when the hierarchy becomes unstable.

## **Conclusion**

Why is the role of small powers detrimental to good great power relations in some instances, whereas in other instances it has a stabilising and pacifying effect? And which factors account for the very different nature of the role of small powers? The answers to these questions shed more light upon the sources of international system stability, the causes of great power war and the variety of functions performed by small powers.

On the basis of the foregoing arguments and the two case studies it would be premature to reach conclusions that could lay claim to having universal applicability. Yet, the fundamental logic of the argument in combination with the empirical evidence drawn from history, do show two things. First, there are sufficient grounds to assume that the role of small powers is relevant in explaining system stability through its effect on great power relations. Second, and in addition, alliance tightness and stability of the hierarchy can be assumed to be the mediating variables that determine the nature of the role of the small power.

Both in bipolarity and in multipolarity, the tightness of alliance systems explain the nature of the role of small powers. In tight alliance systems, dominion or influence over a small power, whether that be for geostrategic, political, economic or symbolic reasons, are of the utmost importance to the great powers, especially if the small power is located in a zone of contention. When alliance systems are tight and the system is heavily polarised, small powers can have a destabilising effect on great power relations and the stability of the overall international system.

The stability of the hierarchy, across different types of polarity, also seems to have a strong effect on the nature of the role of the small power. The stability of the hierarchy depends on a power configuration that is in equilibrium and on whether states perceive the arrangements of a system to be open to adjustment. As long as the hierarchy is stable, it is

unlikely that small or great powers will seek to challenge the existing order. But when the power of one or several of the great powers is in decay, the arrangements of the international system are perceived to be open to adjustment. Great powers will try to get control over other small powers, while these in turn may also seek to emancipate and/or re-align themselves. Consequently, the stability of the international system is threatened.

It is these mediating variables that affect whether small powers contribute positively or negatively to the polarisation of the international system; whether small powers facilitate or undermine great power cooperation; whether power differentials between great and small powers enable command-and-control or pose a moral hazard; whether small powers are buffer zones inhibiting conflict or stepping stones in great power conflict; and whether small powers are safety valves or fire igniters.

The claim that the role of small powers is conducive to great power peace in a stable hierarchy with fluid alliance systems, but destabilising in an unstable hierarchy with tight alliance systems, is illustrated by empirical evidence provided by the two case-studies (see Figure 5).

<u>Alliance system</u>	<u>Stability of the hierarchy</u>	
	stable	unstable
<b>fluid</b>	small powers outside Europe 1963-1989 (Vietnam, Afghanistan)	small powers at the Balkan 1989-present
<b>tight</b>	small powers in Europe 1963-1989 (FRG)	small powers in Europe 1871-1914 (Serbia) and 1945-1963 (FRG)

**Figure 5.** The role of small powers across different types of polarity.

The contribution of this study is to have shown the conditions under which the role of the small power is destabilising, in some cases leading to the outbreak of great power war, and the conditions under which its role is stabilising and conducive to great power peace.

It would be preliminary, however, to generalise these conclusions before they have been put to rigorous empirical test, which could be achieved by pursuing several research approaches, three of which will be listed here. One approach would consist of counting the number of great power wars in the system over a longer period of time and determine the percentage of them in which small powers were either directly or indirectly involved in the outbreak. Direct involvement means that a small power formed the proximate cause of war; for indirect involvement one could posit the contiguity of small powers to the area where great power war breaks out. This could be complemented by a second approach which would examine the interaction effect of alliance tightness or fluidness with the existence of a large number of small powers. A third, and alternative, approach would count the dyad years of great power war and analyse whether there is a correlation with

the number of small powers in the regional system or the world system as a whole, while controlling for variables that have found to be significant for the explanation of variation in great power warfare.

For reasons of length this paper only briefly touched upon the five roles of small powers explaining the fundamental logic illustrated with anecdotal historical evidence. Each single role could be researched in isolation from the other roles, allowing for more sophisticated, refined and elaborated analysis, and supported by more extensive historical case work, in order to better inform our understanding of the role of small powers in the international system. Furthermore, the interaction effect between the role of small powers and system level variables that go beyond mere structure, such as the type of prevailing norms, rules and laws, its level of institutionalisation, but also the nature of the world economy, merits further attention.

Finally, this study warrants a number of observations with respect to the study of small powers and its position in the wider international relations discipline. First, rather than classifying small powers as a separate discipline, and looking at it in splendid isolation – as is oftentimes the case – the international relations discipline would benefit from the inclusion of the small power concept as part of its standard ‘toolset’ in accounting for the whys and ways of the phenomena it seeks to describe and explain across the entire gamut, from general issues relating to group coordination and - bargaining, to concrete case studies such as war contiguity and arms races. Second, researchers of small powers should choose and frame their research questions in such a way that they bear immediate relevance to (theoretical) issues that are of interest to the wider international relations community. Third, researchers of small powers should expand their current focus on the behavior of small powers to encompass an examination of how small power behavior interacts with - and affects the structure of the system. Linking system and unit level analysis – while doing justice to the real and relevant differences between the units – would be a great contribution to the international relations field as a whole. Researchers specialising in small power studies are in an excellent position to make precisely this contribution.

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Overall, the single most important contribution of practical value that students of international relations can make outside the safe confines of the academic community, is to provide decision makers in the real world with the knowledge that will help to build and sustain a stable and peaceful international system. With this study I hope to have made a contribution – if only a small one – by showing that the role of great powers and the role of small powers are both essential in this endeavour.

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