

MALTA: BRIDGE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN (NEUTRALITY AS A SMALL STATE, STATUS SEEKING GRAND STRATEGY)

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This paper will take the Mediterranean island of Malta as a case study to evidence, through a constructivist lens, how it pursues a status seeking strategy as '*a neutral state actively pursuing peace, security and social progress among all nations by adhering to a policy of non-alignment and refusing to participate in any military alliance*' (Maltese Constitution). This manifests as Malta's vocation to serve as a **bridge**: between Europe and the southern shores of the Mediterranean, between Europe and the Arab world, and as a bridge-builder in conflicts such as the Israel-Palestine dispute.

Key findings

- Unlike the great states, which seek to be reckoned with, a small state grand strategy will be ideational, status seeking (for honour and prestige), and norm entrepreneurial; it will be pursued through institutional binding, soft power branding and utility maximization.
- Malta pursues a grand strategy of strategic neutrality, maintained and maximized by positioning itself as a regional interlocutor (Mediterranean bridge) and honest broker of international conflict.
- Malta demonstrates how constitutional neutrality can still enable a solid contribution to multilateral security, offering NATO's Partnership for Peace its technical expertise and norm entrepreneurship (in maritime law, diplomatic studies and SAR), as well as enabling it to play a vital humanitarian role in the 2011 Libya crisis.
- International status seeking cannot be separated from domestic legitimation and Malta's declared strategy is being damaged by contemporary corruption allegations, crisis of rule of law, and immigrant pushbacks which undermine the legitimacy and trust essential to serve as an honest broker. If left unaddressed, these crises will continue to escalate and undermine Malta's grand strategy in the long-term.

Executive summary

Traditionally, Grand Strategy has been attributed to the hegemonic power struggles between core 'major' power players. Its name immediately invokes considerations of size – in scale, scope, ambition, power and the passing of time. Moving beyond traditional, reductive superpower restrictions, one queries: how do small states expand and secure their own fundamental objectives? Small states are conventionally perceived to have little autonomy in their choice of action in the international arena, and accommodation and compliance with great powers are presumed to be the automatic strategy, in return for survival. If small states are so concerned with existential security, it seems difficult to imagine them suited to craft and pursue grand strategic ends. Taking issue with this understanding and recognizing that the hard power game is not one in which small states can hope to dominate in the long term, this paper explores the manner in which small states can pursue a Grand Strategy founded upon the notion of Status. If the Hobbesian international system is one based on gain, safety and reputation, then the last of these must be the sphere in which small states strategize to secure their fundamental objectives. This is then pursued, from a constructivist perspective, through the process of institutional Binding. If World Order does not depend solely on great power preferences but on what constitutes legitimate behavior in the international arena, then small states constrain international power dynamics to their strategic advantage by instituting norms. Seeking to be an active regional player, Malta insisted in the Helsinki summit of 1975 that no peace is possible in Europe without peace in the Mediterranean. As part of



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NATO's Partnership for Peace, this paper sheds light on the manner in which the PfP programme is compatible with Malta's commitment to the principle of neutrality, and how it is able to enhance European and Euro-Atlantic security by addressing emerging security challenges in its exclusive, diplomatic way. The paper concludes that its strategic neutrality allows it to play a unique role in crisis situations (as witnessed in Libya) and that its positioning as the 'Mediterranean Bridge' may in fact constitute a Grand Strategy for a small state in a complex adaptive system today.

Analysis

John Gaddis defines Grand Strategy as 'the calculated relationship of means to large ends'¹. It is concerned with defining the long-term overall objectives to be achieved by a nation - the national interest - and the basic categories of instruments to be applied to that end. It goes beyond essential concerns with survival to the bigger picture thinking about national ambition and the role a state envisions itself playing in the long-term.

Any nation trying to manoeuvre in the international arena must contend with dozens of foreign policy issues on a daily basis. Without a firm grasp of core interests and priorities, there is a danger that policy will simply wander and follow each crisis in an ad hoc manner. A coherent grand strategy will help to keep the national interest front and centre. Hence, the pursuit of a grand strategy looks at how states are able to reorganize their resources in the preservation and advancement of core vital interests. Yet, academics and practitioners thus far have frequently dismissed the capacity for small states to have a grand strategy. Williamson Murray argues that 'great states possess considerable wiggle room in the casting of grand strategy, but small states have virtually none'². He is not alone in this outlook: Dennis Showalter alleged that 'grand strategy is a responsibility of great states' whilst Stephen Krasner holds that 'only policy makers in great-power nations can aspire to realize grand strategies. They rarely succeed'³.

The study of Grand Strategy has predominantly focused on the shaping of World Order by flexing material power resources. If small states are so concerned with existential security, it seems difficult to imagine them suited to craft and pursue grand strategic ends. This is a reductive view of contemporary international relations and relational grand strategic pursuits. In *Small State Status Seeking: Norway's Quest for International Standing*, Neumann & Carvalho draw on an analogy of Hobbes' treatment of men which states that in international relations, states strive to be feared, strive for glory, and strive for gain – with glory equating to status. Similarly, in *A Cultural Theory of International Relations*, Ned Lebow argues that international politics is motivated by three drivers of human action: appetite, reason and 'spirit'. Referring to the ancient Greek notion of *thumos* (pride in one's status in society), this concept of 'spirit' equates with 'strivings for honour and standing [that] influence, if not often shape, political behaviour'⁴. From a constructivist perspective, therefore, one may argue that there are means of pursuing grand strategic ends which move beyond realist conceptions of international security and material goals. If strategies of territorial domination have become inadmissible, and there is no opportunity for small states to expand in material size through conquest, then it is through 'status seeking' that small states can advance their international positioning. Neumann & Carvalho argue that there are status hierarchies beyond seeking to be a great power; amongst these, seeking 'higher moral involvement' and seeking to be 'useful to others' as opposed to the great power pursuit of 'being a state to be reckoned with'. Thus, honour and reputation may be considered the drivers of small state foreign policy⁵.

Gone are the days when success of states was primarily measured in terms of their defence capacity and territorial foreign expansion. The notion of power has advanced from Dahl (1961) viewing power as a resource (coercive threats or rewards), through the agenda setting power of Bachrach and Baratz (1964) to Lukes' third face of power (1970) as the shaping of beliefs and preferences. There are normative and psychological constraints on the use of military power as an instrument of national power which have altered the power game. Status allows states to exert greater influence than their population or resource capacity would suggest. It does not exist in isolation, however, but is relational and dependent on the recognition of external players. Unlike material capability, it is not fixed and able to be enhanced or lost by engagement with international society.

International institutions put into force common rules which all actors must abide by. This restricts the actions of the strong by mitigating anarchy and uncertainty, reducing power politics by enhancing the prospects for cooperation between member states, and simultaneously bolstering the weaker states by amplifying their collective voice and increasing freedom of manoeuvre. Whilst great powers may revert to hard power to shape world order, small powers do not have this recourse so have an interest in ordering international behaviour through institutions and advocating multilateralism. As Michael Barnett argues, 'World Orders are created and sustained not only by great power preferences but also by changing understandings of



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what constitutes a legitimate international order⁶. For a small state, the pursuit of a grand strategy is therefore possible through institutional binding and norm entrepreneurship, strengthening the governance of international security through the creation of international rules.

Malta: Case in Practice

The Mediterranean island of Malta is a prime case study to evidence these arguments in practice. Malta is considered a small state in accordance with almost any metric of measurement. Located at the heart of the Mediterranean, Malta has a small fixed size, with a population of 432,053 (in 2018) across 316 km² of land - making Malta the 10th smallest sovereign state in the world. There are fewer than 2,000 active personnel in the military service, and as the smallest of the EU small states Malta conforms to many of the structural, economic and political limitations endemic to small states. Amongst these typical characteristics, one finds a small domestic market and limited competition possibilities, limited human capital, poor natural resources, constraints upon the labour market, and insularity and remoteness costs due to its island status. However, like a number of other particularly successful small states, such as Qatar, Singapore and Bahrain, Malta has managed to achieve high income by leveraging its geostrategic location, its educated and specialized workforce, robust legal and parliamentary systems, and integrated financial sectors – qualities which many small states lack or have yet to harness to their strategic advantage due to additional domestic vulnerabilities.

With European Union membership looming in 2004, then incumbent Foreign Minister Michael Frendo (of the Nationalist Party) was determined that Maltese domestic and foreign policies not be swept up in the incoming tide of European legislation. Frendo sought to ensure ‘that Malta establishes a reputation of being a solid, serious, committed member state which **defends its legitimate interests as a small state while being a trusted team-player**. A country which **further the Mediterranean dimension within the EU** while, at the same time, strengthening the EU's presence in the Mediterranean region.’⁷ This has been the declared strategy that has endured unchangingly ever since ascending to the EU, and the origins of which are evident over the course of Maltese independent history. In its pursuit of trust, it is a status-seeking grand strategy, presenting Malta as a Mediterranean bridge, whilst recognising the binding power of multilateral institutionalism in pursuing strategic interests.

The result of this strategic conversation was the publication, in 2006, of the ‘Strategic Objectives of Malta’s Foreign Policy’ which outlined twenty strategic objectives set to serve as a guiding framework for Malta’s political action in international affairs. This was the perfect example of a small state engaging in a serious, collaborative consultation process across all major stakeholders to determine where the nation has come from, where it presently stands and where it seeks to go in the future. It is a grand strategic document which has steered Maltese foreign policy throughout the seven years that followed, and arguably still underscores decision-making today. When updated under a Labour government in 2013, very little substantive change was made to the essence of the documents, revealing an enduring commitment to the long-term policies being pursued by Malta across the political spectrum. This is particularly surprising when bearing in mind the prevailing polarized and pluralist context of Maltese society wherein the two chief political parties are largely diametrically opposed on policymaking, and religious institutions still play a significant influencing role on decision making.

As Frendo asserts ‘We are a country that wholly forms part of Europe and wholly forms part of the Mediterranean. We are an island state. We attained sovereign statehood within living memory, after centuries of colonial rule. We are on a cultural frontier between Europe and North Africa, speaking a language that fuses Semitic and Romance. We are necessarily foreign trade oriented. Our foreign policy must reflect our realities and our Maltese and European values’⁸. These five key aspects succinctly summarise the geopolitical, historical, economic and anthropological foundations upon which Maltese grand strategy must be built and the particular standpoint from which the strategists must embark. Their interlinkages are clear: the restrictions of small island status necessitating the prioritization of foreign trade, for instance; but may also be leveraged as strengths, as seen in the engagement with foreign audiences across continents.

Whilst not mentioned in the specific objectives themselves, each of these goals stems from the overarching grand strategy of neutrality which defines Malta’s external positioning. As mentioned previously, the Maltese constitution clearly declares that: ‘Malta is a **neutral state** actively pursuing peace, security and social progress among all nations by adhering to a **policy of non-alignment** and refusing to participate in any military alliance’.



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This neutrality is an understandably strategic position, coming from a country with a long history of colonial domination which is seeking to ensure the maintenance of independent sovereignty. Hiding strategies are, in fact, a hallmark of small states determined to preserve autonomy. It is difficult for Malta to hide entirely, however, due to its prime geostrategic location. The Mediterranean Sea is unique among the seas; its position as the meeting point of three continents has given it a commanding strategic and economic importance. Malta has therefore sought to brand itself as ‘a peaceful interlocutor between conflicted countries in the Mediterranean’ in a bid to both preserve its strategic neutrality, as well as to maximize the advantages of this role.

Malta’s positioning as a Mediterranean Bridge may be traced as far back as the 1970s, when Malta blocked the Helsinki act from passing until a chapter on Mediterranean security was incorporated. This was a shocking use of CSCE veto rights by one of the smallest states in the organisation. As then President Guido de Marco asserted in 2009, ‘how right was Malta to insist in the Helsinki summit of 1975 that no peace was possible in Europe unless there was peace in the Mediterranean’⁹. Assertions in line with this theme were many over the years, including incumbent President Joseph Muscat’s 2015 statement that Malta has the ‘vocation to serve as a bridge between Europe and the Southern shores of the Mediterranean’¹⁰.

Malta’s deep historical and ethnic bond with the Arab population, the similarity of the language, and ease of communication have enabled Malta to maintain these strong connections and to personify them within the framework of the European Union. In fact Dr John Paul Grech, then Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated in 2011 that ‘geographically we are Mediterranean, but everything about our political identity is European. We wanted to be the voice of the Arab world in the European Union... At this stage, Malta is being consulted at EU and Arab-world level, which requires acute presence of mind. This is where the credibility of our country comes to the fore’¹¹.

The notion of ‘credibility’ is essential here, as the trend for Malta to associate its status seeking capabilities with being a neutral interlocutor became the core aspect of its foreign policy. This is a brokering role, looked upon in small state theory as an advantageous ‘smart state’ approach. It enables small states to leverage their inherent weaknesses by presenting themselves as mediators, who will not take advantage of negotiations for their own vested self-interest; they are thereby able to exert influence over international conflict resolution and policymaking. As a constitutionally neutral nation, Malta is a prime candidate in this regard. In sharp contrast to realist understanding of asymmetric power relations, here weakness is leveraged as a resource in itself, and this is translated directly to inexpensive influence.

This explains why, in 2017, incumbent Foreign Minister Carmelo Abela asserted that ‘Malta wishes to be considered by all stakeholders in the Israel-Palestinian conflict as a bridgebuilder...this is our vocation’. In line with this, Malta serves as Rapporteur of the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People. Malta also plays host to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean, an inter-state organisation which stands for regional parliamentary diplomacy and hence promotes cooperation between states within the Mediterranean region. As Neumann & Carvalho point out, assuming moral responsibility for the orderly maintenance of the international system has been a staple of great power behaviour; therefore, a small state will see its status rewards increase significantly if it takes on the responsibility of fostering international peace and security. Brokering peace is a useful role which begets reputation and prestige, whilst being relatively inexpensive.

For Malta, the ‘Mediterranean Bridge’ approach is what Alison Bailes calls a declared strategy – designed to create a policy consensus and promote coordination of cross-sectoral actions serving the goals of the strategy. In practice, policies largely appear to support this overarching strategy, ranging from diplomatic mediation efforts, to the deployment of the Armed Forces of Malta in support of Mediterranean search and rescue operations. Malta’s naval flotilla consists of seven patrol vessels, five interceptor vessels and several smaller craft. Not only have they saved thousands of lives in the Mediterranean, but the severely limited human resources are stretched to the limit coordinating SAR operations and overseeing the militarised detention compounds. In both cases it is evident that the armed forces perform civilian, not military, duties. Constitutionally and structurally unable to contribute to international military combat operations, Malta collaborates in other spheres, ranging from logistics, to the sharing of intelligence, participation in counter-terrorism and anti-human trafficking operations, and routine collaboration between the policy and security services and Europol. In this regard, military neutrality does not hold Malta back from being a key player in the region and playing a unique humanitarian role.



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This is further witnessed with respect to Malta's relationship with NATO. Malta has a tumultuous history with NATO, having joined the Partnership for Peace in 1995 under a Nationalist Party administration, then pulling out of the partnership after Labour won the following year's parliamentary election amid concerns that it would violate the nation's constitutional neutrality. Such a withdrawal was unprecedented and has never been replicated by any other country. In 2008 Nationalist Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi reactivated the partnership, and today there is consensus between the parties that cooperation can take place in line with Malta's neutral position. Malta has been a voice in this forum for peace and economic development in the Mediterranean. U.S. European Command have asserted that 'with more than 33% of the world merchant traffic passing between Malta and Sicily, and more than 80% of Europe's energy resources traveling near the island nation, Malta's role in maintaining maritime domain awareness is critical.¹²' Just offshore the coast of Malta, the NATO maritime operation, Sea Guardian, provides support to the EU Operation Sophia. Moreover, Malta is a key contributor to the partnership through traditional small state avenues of technical expertise and norm entrepreneurship, most notably with respect to international maritime law, diplomatic studies (through MEDAC) and search and rescue.

The 2011 Libya crisis typified the utility of Malta for multilateral security cooperation. At the time, NATO's top military commander, American Admiral James Stavridis, commended Malta for providing superb help to NATO with emergency landings and airspace, and response to refugees as Libya operations continued. Indeed, Malta became the humanitarian hub for the deployment of humanitarian aid, uncompromised by military involvement. Malta further provided vital support in the evacuation of third-country nationals and provided ongoing support to the forces of nations involved in the enforcement of UN Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973. Malta has continued to assist NATO in its capacity building efforts in Libya in the aftermath of the crisis, and in 2017 General Jens Stoltenberg became the first NATO Secretary General to visit Malta, signaling the positive state of the current partnership.

Contemporary Crises and Moving Forward

Joining the European Union was a turning point for Malta: cementing its turn away from the questionable relationships with dictatorial governments abroad in the 1980s, to becoming a respected member of an international economic and political community by means of which it could reap rewards and sow seeds of its own design. International status seeking, however, cannot be separated from domestic legitimation and there are a range of red flags which could undermine the success of Malta's grand strategic pursuits. Malta was ranked an 'EU Slacker' in development aid and humanitarian aid in 2015 by the European Council on Foreign Relations. Moreover, Malta's Search And Rescue (SAR) zone is disproportionately large and the country is becoming increasingly hostile to arrivals. Some 750 times larger than the island itself, the SAR zone stretches from Tunisia to Cyprus and thus any rescues made in this zone must disembark in Malta, creating onerous security and humanitarian responsibilities for the small state. The arrival of 3,000 illegal immigrants on the island between 2002 and 2005 was deemed equivalent to the hypothetical landing of 420,000 in Italy within the same brief period if time. Foreign Minister Frenco stated that 'the current severe strains on Malta's health, employment and social services, its internal security and public order, its social fabric and on the labour market, cannot be understated'. At the same time, he asserted that 'Malta has been generous, just and humane in its response'¹³. Indeed, as the boats continued to reach Maltese shores, the international and moral obligation to provide asylum or protected humanitarian status was upheld and over half of the illegal immigrants during this period were granted refugee or protected humanitarian status. This was the highest rate of acceptance in the European Union and builds on the long historical and religious tradition of the Maltese providing refuge to those most in need (dating back to the conversion of the whole island's population by the shipwrecked Saint Paul).

This moral responsibility characterized the manner in which the Maltese looked outwards during this era, yet the strain on resources would eventually prove too much. The sentiment towards asylum seekers is seen to have transformed, according to Times of Malta online editor Herman Grech, 'from the compassion shown when the first boats started landing in 2002, towards indifference, and, in the last few years, outright racism among sectors of society'¹⁴. The push-back of immigrants as recently as the June 2018 Aquarius crisis demonstrates that Malta may not be as sincere about its humanitarian vocation as its politicians declare, and that its pious vision is not backed up by deep intent. Finally, the slew of corruption allegations levelled against several key figures in the current Labour government, culminating in the assassination of the nation's premier investigative journalist, Daphne Caruana Galizia, in October has called into question the rule of law in Malta. These concerns must be addressed, and robust trust building measures implemented to restore confidence in the country. If doubt is cast on the integrity of the political elite, this runs contrary to the image of an 'honest' broker and will wreak havoc on Malta's grand strategy in the long-term.

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