

POLITICAL ELITES, IDEAS AND FOREIGN POLICY: Explaining and Understanding the International Behavior of Small States in the Former Soviet Union

Summary

What explains change and continuity in the foreign policy behavior of small states? Given the proliferation of small states over the past century, it is surprising that this topic has received relatively little systematic attention in the International Relations scholarship compared to the focus on Great Powers. The conventional wisdom on this subject argues that small states bandwagon with threatening great powers rather than balance against them. In this study, authors suggest that this perspective regarding small states may very well serve to explain the foreign policy behavior of most small states in the international system, alternatively providing scholars with some important puzzles that are worthy of further in-depth study. Authors argue that state and individual level variables - particularly elite ideas - can play a greater role in explaining the foreign policy behavior of small states than has generally been appreciated, and that small states sometimes prefer to balance rather than bandwagon. These empirical claims are explored using unique evidence from primary sources and interviews to understand Georgia's balancing behavior with Russia in the face of clear economic costs and real military risks.

Through a detailed study of Georgia's foreign policy behavior, authors demonstrate that Georgia's foreign policy since the Rose Revolution, in contrast to previous eras, has become linear and consistently oriented with the West. Despite strong systemic pressures to shift its course, Georgia's foreign policy has displayed remarkable continuity. This behavioral pattern, authors argue, represents a puzzle for wholly structural and materialistic approaches to the foreign policy behavior of small states and can be better explained by a focus on ideas and identities. The authors demonstrate that in Georgia, similarly to other states, elite ideas may influence the direction, speed and scope of foreign policy just as much as the regional balance of power, military threat and dyadic economic ties.

Additionally, the authors develop these claims further by focusing on two types of elite ideas: 1) Ideas about the identity of the state; and 2) ideas about the purpose of the state. The content of each of these ideas is discussed and their role in explaining Georgia's foreign policy behavior is investigated. The authors also explore the notion that an ideational approach offers a plausible explanation of otherwise puzzling behavior, providing a better explanation of the country's foreign policy dynamics than do frameworks that focus primarily on the international and regional balance of economic and military power. Although Georgia may be an exception that proves the 'bandwagoning rule', it may help researchers to better understand the conditions under which materialist explanations of small state foreign policy behavior may miss their predictive mark and when incorporating the role of elite ideas can provide explanatory leverage.

The authors illustrate that an emphasis on elite ideas and identities can provide significant leverage in understanding the foreign policy behavior of a critical case, noting that it is amenable to being tested on other states and in other regions of the world in future research. There are significant benefits in what could be learned from a chronological case study, despite the clear limitations; these include the ability to utilize original data that are difficult to collect in a large-N design, focusing explicitly on the posited causal mechanism. By analyzing

a compelling, critical and puzzling case, this study highlights the role that elite ideas and identities may play in explaining the foreign policy of small states in the international system. The study attempts to generate a new theory with a focus on elites and their ideas regarding the state, its identity, national values and strategic goals. It goes without saying that there are challenges in incorporating the role of ideas and identities, which are often harder to measure and observe than purely material factors, but this in and of itself should not be the reason for preferring a theory that does not explain substantively important variations in international relations.

The structure of the book is as follows. The first introductory chapter outlines the major research questions and hypothesis and discusses possible alternative explanations of the study. The second chapter focuses on epistemological and methodological foundations of the study and presents an in-depth analysis of the specific methods used during the research process. The third chapter of the book is dedicated to the theoretical overview; state-of-the-art research on the foreign policy behavior of small states and gaps and limitations in current theoretical literature are discussed and outlined. In the fourth chapter, authors propose an ideational approach to studying small states' foreign policy and situate their argument in the literature, demonstrating how it expands explanatory scope to include small states' foreign policy behavior. In the fifth chapter, authors discuss the elites' important ideas, describe the causal mechanisms via which ideas and identities influence foreign policy and analyze their impact on Georgia's foreign policy trajectory. Finally, the authors discuss the main implications and limitations of the study .