

UDC: 327.5:321.01
DOI: 10.59214/ua.fa/5.2025.18

Łukasz Kozera*

*Doctor of Political Sciences, Associate Professor
University of the National Education Commission
30-084, 2 Podchorążych, Kraków, Poland
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0707-4881>*

Strategies of asymmetric diplomacy of small states in a multipolar world

Abstract. The relevance of the study is determined by the need to understand the role of small states in the transformation of the international system in the context of the transition to multipolarity. The aim of the study was to analyse the theoretical foundations and practical mechanisms of asymmetric diplomacy of small states in the context of the transformation of the global order, to identify the key factors of its effectiveness and to justify the optimal approaches to its implementation. Methodologically, the work was based on institutional analysis with elements of comparative and conceptual modelling. The study identified four types of asymmetric diplomacy: humanitarian, expert, subversive and neutral, each of which is based on the resources and strategic positioning of small states. The empirical material covered cases from Qatar, Norway, Switzerland, Singapore, Iceland, Estonia, Ireland, Costa Rica, and Finland. The study analysed examples of information influence, mediation, climate diplomacy, institutional participation and educational partnerships as foreign policy tools. Norway uses humanitarian diplomacy and mediation, relying on its reputation as a neutral peacemaker, and is actively involved in peace processes (Colombia, Sri Lanka), combining state initiatives with the work of non-governmental organisations. Qatar implements a subversive strategy through media influence and economic diplomacy, mediating conflicts in the Middle East and using financial resources to build geopolitical authority. Singapore's main tool is expert diplomacy in the fields of technology, fintech and climate, creating international platforms (Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore FinTech Festival) and positioning itself as a neutral technocratic mediator between the West and Asia. The conclusion found that small states are capable of implementing influential foreign policy through niche expertise and institutional positioning. The practical significance of the work lies in the development of a conceptual framework for the formation of foreign policy strategies of small states in a complex global environment

Keywords: humanitarian diplomacy; climate diplomacy; geopolitical pressure; neutrality; mediation

Introduction

In the context of the transformation of the international system, which is gradually moving away from bipolar and even unipolar logic towards a new form of multipolarity, there are small states which, despite their limited resources, actively influence regional and global processes. In the 21st century, the multipolar world is characterised by increasing fragmentation of influence, flexibility of alliances, and the growing role of non-state actors, which precedes the growing role of actors with limited leverage. In this context, it is relevant to study the strategies by which small states transform their vulnerability into a competitive advantage, in particular through the use of asymmetric approaches to foreign policy, including innovative forms of diplomacy, cultural influence, mediation, and niche expertise. The scientific literature of the 2020s has shown a growing interest in studying the role of small

states in the transformation of the global diplomatic landscape, which is a consequence of the gradual breakdown of the traditional model of dominance by large geopolitical actors and the rise of alternative forms of influence. This necessitates a review of theoretical and practical approaches to the role of small states in international relations, which are increasingly becoming not only objects of foreign policy for large states, but also active participants in global processes. In this context, research focusing on non-standard, asymmetric forms of diplomacy that allow small states to compensate for their lack of traditional "hard power" through innovation, flexibility and strategic manoeuvring is becoming increasingly relevant. In particular, A. Oztuna (2024) studied the limited effectiveness of third parties – Egypt, the United States of America (USA), Qatar, the European Union (EU) and Jordan – in

Received: 14.07.2025, Revised: 20.09.2025, Accepted: 26.10.2025

Suggested Citation:

Kozera, Ł. (2025). Strategies of asymmetric diplomacy of small states in a multipolar world. *Foreign Affairs*, 35(5), 18-28. doi: 10.59214/ua.fa/5.2025.18.

*Corresponding author



Copyright © The Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

mediating the conflict in Gaza. The author emphasised that it is precisely the factors of impartiality, adaptability and the ability to strategically balance that determine the effectiveness of diplomatic involvement. These characteristics, as the experience of small states shows, may be necessary in conflicts where large states lose the trust of the parties. In turn, M. Stănescu (2024) highlighted the example of Moldova, which, being a small and neutral state, demonstrates the effectiveness of neutral diplomacy, transforming from a passive position into an active foreign policy strategy. This allows Moldova to be a mediator between the conflicting parties, maintaining a balance between the influence of Russia and the West, which is an example of a subtle form of asymmetric balancing. R. Lakshminarayanan's (2021) research expanded the understanding of asymmetric diplomacy, emphasising mutually beneficial partnerships between small states and new centres of influence, particularly in a geo-economic context. Using the example of Kuwait's cooperation with India, the author demonstrated how small states shape foreign policy strategies that combine pragmatism, investment attractiveness and intellectual capital, and use "soft power" to assert regional authority. In a broader context, D.M. Ramjit (2025) emphasised the growing role of non-state actors – corporations, transnational institutions, technology companies – in shaping diplomatic practice. This creates new conditions for small states, which can use niche expertise (e.g., in fintech, cybersecurity, or ecology) to strengthen their position in the international system, in particular through institutional partnerships with private structures and multilateral mechanisms. R. Pedi & A. Wivel (2022) proposed a comparative analysis of the strategies of small states in a system dominated by so-called "limited orders" formed by the United States and China. The authors pointed out that in a fragmented multipolar environment, small states are forced to seek complex forms of balancing between competing centres of influence, using both coalition networks and flexible diplomatic positioning. This involves not only adapting to the geopolitical environment, but also actively shaping it through participation in regional and global initiatives.

At the same time, despite the availability of a wide range of studies, there remains a noticeable lack of theoretical understanding of asymmetric diplomacy as an independent analytical category. Most authors have focused on individual components of small states' influence, such as soft power, mediation, or humanitarian diplomacy, but these aspects have rarely been considered as elements of a comprehensive strategy aimed at systematically overcoming asymmetry in international relations. K. Al-Khulaifi (2024) criticised the neorealist approach, which views small states exclusively as weak actors, but the study focuses on critical discursive analysis without deriving an applied model that would allow for the generalisation of effective strategies for behaviour in conditions of power inequality. Similarly, the works of A. Gehrman (2022), O. Sharofiddinov (2024) and A. Mohamed (2025), devoted to Qatar's foreign policy experience, although they revealed elements of asymmetric influence (through energy diplomacy, media, humanitarian initiatives), did not formulate a generalised conceptual model that could be applied to a wider range of small states. Therefore, there

remains a pressing scientific need for the theoretical conceptualisation of asymmetric diplomacy as a systemic phenomenon that includes the interaction of political flexibility, communication power, expert participation and institutional influence. It is precisely this perspective that allows to propose a new analytical framework for understanding the strategies of small states in a multipolar world. The aim of this study was to provide a theoretical understanding and empirical analysis of the strategies of asymmetric diplomacy of small states in the context of a multipolar world order. The research hypothesis was that small states compensate for their structural resource constraints through targeted institutional activity, transforming it into a source of diplomatic influence in a multipolar environment.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted using an interdisciplinary approach combining elements of international relations, political theory, strategic analysis and diplomatic studies, covering the period 2015-2025, with a primary focus on 2020-2025, which corresponds to the era of the formation of a new multipolarity, the activation of small states, and global crises (climatic, technological, and conflictual). The main methodological framework was institutional analysis, which allowed to study the behaviour of small states (Norway, Singapore and Qatar) in the global system through the prism of their participation in international organisations, forums, platforms and coalitions. The justified use of instrumental comparison made it possible to identify and systematise the main types of asymmetric diplomacy, comparing states with different historical legacies, regional contexts and strategic priorities. The comparison of small states' asymmetric diplomacy strategies was carried out according to the following criteria: analysis of the diplomatic behaviour traditions and historical experience of each state; consideration of the geopolitical environment and specifics of the region where the state operates; identification of the key foreign policy goals of each country; degree of involvement in international institutions and forums; analysis of participation in international organisations and initiatives; identification of key areas of diplomatic activity (e.g. climate, cybersecurity, mediation) and methods of implementing foreign policy. Within this approach, a classification modelling method was used to structure diplomatic practices according to four typical models: subversive, expert, humanitarian and neutral.

The typological classification was carried out taking into account a number of empirical parameters – forms of participation in global governance, institutional activity, selected areas of specialisation and strategies of influence. The study was based on an analysis of the diplomatic practices of Norway, Qatar and Singapore, which were selected as key cases due to their representativeness for different models of asymmetric diplomacy. The choice of these three countries was based on their contrasting approaches to diplomacy, regional diversity and proven effectiveness in achieving influence in a multipolar environment. Other states (Switzerland, Estonia, Costa Rica, etc.) were used only as illustrative examples for specific aspects of the typology. The study uses a comprehensive approach that combines several complementary methods. The main

method was case studies, which allowed for the analysis of applied cases of small states' involvement in global processes. In order to identify the characteristics of institutional participation of small states as a compensatory mechanism in the absence of military or economic superiority, institutional analysis was used, focused on studying the role of international organisations, platforms and partnership programmes. In order to identify strategies for converting limited resource potential into diplomatic influence, a content analysis of official materials, reports and media sources was conducted. A comparative reflection method was also used to compare the traditional diplomacy of large states with the asymmetric approaches of small states in the areas of cultural diplomacy, mediation, expert participation and institutional lobbying. The empirical basis was provided by examples reflecting various areas of diplomatic activity of small states. The activities of the Al Jazeera news agency as an instrument of Qatar's information influence were analysed (Al-Mohannadi, 2024). Norway's participation in peacekeeping processes in Colombia and Sri Lanka was considered separately (Pajo, 2018). The functioning of the Norwegian Institute for Human Rights as an element of foreign policy was also analysed (Norwegian Refugee Council, n.d.). Special attention was paid to the case of Singapore's climate and technology diplomacy, implemented through the Singapore FinTech Festival (n.d.). Additionally, the role of the Shangri-La Dialogue (n.d.) as a platform for security cooperation is examined. The experience of Estonia within the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (n.d.) is studied. The analysis includes international programmes and initiatives that demonstrate formats for involving small states in the global agenda. These include Education Finland (n.d.), the Small Island Developing States initiative (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.), and the Climate Action Data Trust platform (n.d.). Within the framework of climate policy, the REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) initiative (UNFCCC, n.d.b) was analysed. The participation of small states in the Conference of the Parties (UNFCCC, n.d.a) was examined. The activity of these states within regional integration associations – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, n.d.) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC, n.d.) – was evaluated separately. The collected data was interpreted through the prism of institutional neutrality, technocratic specialisation, reputational legitimacy and moral authority as key mechanisms of influence of small states. The constructive role of these states in shaping the global order was assessed in terms of their influence on the norms, procedures, institutions, and discourses that define international relations in a multipolar environment.

Results

Theoretical foundations of asymmetric diplomacy of small states. In international relations, which are increasingly characterised by multipolarity, there exists a need to rethink the role of small states, especially in the context of their diplomatic activity. In this context, the concept of asymmetric diplomacy is becoming increasingly relevant as an explanatory category that allows to understand the non-traditional approaches of small states to participation

in global politics. Asymmetric diplomacy is defined as a form of foreign policy behaviour characteristic of actors with limited resource potential who nevertheless achieve significant influence through the use of flexible, adaptive and institutionally oriented strategies (Womack, 2016). It is based on an awareness of the objective asymmetry between the capabilities of a small state and the potential of large states, but transforms this weakness into an advantage through highly specialised diplomatic activity. One of the key features of asymmetric diplomacy is its indirect nature: small states avoid direct confrontation, instead using alternative means such as cultural diplomacy, mediation, expert participation, institutional involvement in global forums, etc. (Long & Long, 2022). Unlike traditional power, which relies on military might, economic superiority, and political pressure, asymmetric diplomacy is dialogical, contextual, and aimed at building inter-state trust. The influence of large states is often realised through policies of domination, while small states build their authority on reputation, stability, competence in certain areas (e.g., environmental policy, human rights, conflict studies) and the ability to act as independent, impartial participants in negotiation processes. Thus, asymmetric diplomacy is a tool for mobilising soft power, which allows strategic goals to be achieved without the use of coercion or harsh pressure. The characteristics of asymmetric diplomacy become clear through an analysis of the structural limitations and, at the same time, the potential advantages inherent in small states. The territorial factor usually limits the mobilisation of resources: small states typically have a small geographical area, which makes it impossible to develop a full-fledged defence infrastructure or influence cross-border processes. Demographic limitations (small population) negatively affect the formation of a strong human resource pool in foreign policy, the defence sector, and technology. Economic factors lead to dependence on external markets, international aid or strategic investments, which reduces autonomy in decision-making in the field of security or international trade (Albreki, 2025). At the same time, these limitations are often offset by advantages that are unavailable to large states. First and foremost, this is flexibility in decision-making, as small states are not bound by multi-level bureaucratic processes and can quickly change their foreign policy priorities. For example, Qatar managed to reorient itself towards the role of mediator in regional conflicts after geopolitical ostracism by Saudi Arabia (Al-Mohannadi, 2024). The second advantage is neutrality, which is an important characteristic for mediation efforts: many small states are not associated with a colonial past, imperial ambitions or global intervention, which allows to act as arbitrators trusted by both sides of the conflict.

Expertise as a tool for enhancing diplomatic influence deserves special attention. Small states invest resources in training think tanks, expert groups and specialised diplomats who have unique knowledge in specific areas (peacebuilding, energy, digital security, etc.). In this way, they compensate for their quantitative weakness with a qualitative advantage. This expertise is a legitimising factor for participation in international platforms, in particular as partners or facilitators of dialogue. In this context, asymmetric diplomacy is not a form of passive adaptation, but rather a manifestation of active shaping of the global

order by weaker actors in the international system. In the context of a multipolar world, where formal hierarchies of power are increasingly giving way to flexible and situational configurations of influence, small states demonstrate high adaptability through the use of asymmetric diplomatic strategies, in particular through active participation in international institutions. Such institutional activity is not merely a compensatory mechanism in the absence of hard power, but a systematic policy of positioning oneself as an influential, legitimate and predictable actor in international relations. One of the key instruments of such activity is involvement in global and regional organisations, which provide small states with a formalised platform for political participation. For example, Costa Rica has historically established itself as an active participant in multilateral diplomacy through the United Nations (UN), particularly on issues of disarmament, human rights, and environmental security (Solís, 2022). The abolition of army in 1949 not only did not diminish its subjectivity, but on the contrary, strengthened its legitimacy in humanitarian and peacekeeping processes. Similarly, Iceland, despite its modest military capabilities, actively participates in global climate discussions and has a stable diplomatic presence in the structures of the UN, the OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and the Arctic Council, promoting the agenda of environmental responsibility and sustainable development (Bykova, 2024). In the context under consideration, mediation acts as a mechanism of diplomatic influence – a format of diplomatic intermediation in which a neutral, small state provides a communication platform for opposing parties (Ruhe, 2020). Switzerland is a typical example of such a strategy, successfully combining military neutrality with a policy of diplomatic activism. This country has provided venues for negotiations between the United States and Iran, Russia and Georgia, Colombia and rebel groups. Institutional infrastructure, legal transparency and diplomatic competence enable Switzerland to maintain its position as a “pure mediator,” which is also the source of its soft power. “Soft power” emerges as another fundamental element of institutional activity. Small states that lack adequate military or economic resources often pursue their foreign policy through cultural expansion, ethical legitimacy, humanitarian presence and transnational educational programmes (Long & Long, 2022). Finland, for example, has gained a reputation as a global leader in education, turning its own system into an object of diplomatic image (Sahlberg, 2021). Through initiatives such as Education Finland (n.d.), it actively promotes its interests in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, shaping the image of an innovative, open, and peace-loving state. Another manifestation of effective asymmetric influence is the participation of small states in network coalitions, informal alliances

and temporary blocs that function on the basis of common interests rather than resource parity. In this context, an example is the Small Island Developing States (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.), which actively shapes the agenda in the areas of climate change, maritime security and sustainable development (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). The union of states such as Barbados, Malta, Fiji, Antigua and Barbuda allows to jointly counter threats that pose an existential danger, despite the absence of classic signs of power. Through collective action within the UN and COP structures, these states influence the formulation of global environmental norms, insisting on fairness in climate finance.

Another example is the Baltic countries, particularly Estonia, which, despite its limited territory and population, has established itself as a digital leader within the European Union. It is actively involved in shaping European cyber policy, developing digital security infrastructure and cooperating with NATO through the Centre of Excellence for Cyber Defence (Gold, 2019). Through integration into technocratic and regulatory-oriented platforms, states are expanding their functional presence in areas at the intersection of technology, security, and ethics. This approach in the field of international management and politics demonstrates how innovative technologies and artificial intelligence contribute to process automation, strengthening cybersecurity, improving analytics and informed decision-making, increasing the efficiency and competitiveness of both public and private institutions in the global business environment (Aizenberh, 2024). In general, institutional activity and asymmetric forms of cooperation not only compensate for the deficit of classical resources of power, but also transform the very understanding of international subjectivity. The influence of small states is based not on coercion, but on reputation, participation, responsibility and the ability to communicate in a complex, multi-level world. In a system of international relations where structural inequality between actors is chronic, small states resort to various diplomatic strategies that allow not only to adapt to geopolitical challenges, but also, in some cases, to initiate changes in the global order. Given their limited potential in the sphere of “hard power,” small states develop highly specialised approaches based on institutional ingenuity, reputational capital, and the ability to operate in highly turbulent conditions. One of the methodological tools that allows such approaches to be classified is the typology of diplomatic strategies, which covers four key models: subversive, expert, humanitarian, and neutral (Turunen, 2020). In each case, this is not a random set of tactics, but a consistent, institutionalised policy that reflects the identity of the state, its foreign policy priorities and the instruments of influence at its disposal. An overview of these strategies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Typology of diplomatic strategies of small states

Strategy name	Key features	Implementation mechanisms	Typical examples of countries	Specific cases of application
Subversive	Asymmetric influence through information pressure, funding of non-governmental actors, undermining of opponents' positions; often implemented in a conflictual geopolitical environment	Media interventions, proxy diplomacy, support for opposition movements, and “hybrid” platforms of influence	Qatar	Use of Al Jazeera to shape the information agenda in the Middle East; diplomatic support for Hezbollah from Lebanon

Table 1. Continued

Strategy name	Key features	Implementation mechanisms	Typical examples of countries	Specific cases of application
Expert	Shaping foreign policy through a high level of specialisation in narrow areas: digital security, governance, ecology, education	Support for expert centres, participation in the development of international standards, and the presentation of the state model as an exportable product	Singapore	Establishment of a NATO cyber security centre (CCDCOE) in Estonia; export of Finnish educational models; Singaporean model of public management being adapted in African countries
Humanitarian	Focus on human rights, development aid, peacebuilding; legitimacy through moral authority	Mediation in conflicts, financing of humanitarian missions, diplomacy of sympathy	Norway	Norway's mediation in Colombia and Sri Lanka; Switzerland's role in US-Iran negotiations; Costa Rica's activity in the field of disarmament and climate protection

Source: compiled by the author based on H. Thune (2015), S. Murphy (2019), L. Barkho (2019), S. Turunen (2020), P. Sahlberg (2021), A. Echendu (2022), L. Solís (2022), Samha (2023), A. Bykova (2024), A. Al Breiki (2025), NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (n.d.)

A generalisation of the presented typology reveals systemic diversity in the approaches of small states to the realisation of their diplomatic interests, which is determined both by their historical heritage and their geopolitical positioning in the 21st century. On the one hand, the subversive model is typical for states seeking to break the established balance of power in their region (Qatar, Slovenia), appealing to information mobilisation, media pressure or indirect intervention. On the other hand, the expert strategy is formed around the technological or managerial domain, where small states have unquestionable competence and can be a model for other countries. The humanitarian strategy, on the other hand, is based on ethical legitimacy and recognition of the state's role as a peacemaker, dialogue facilitator or provider of humanitarian support. This allows small states to exert a disproportionately significant influence on peace processes without direct involvement in military-political conflicts. The neutral strategy, in turn, serves as a foundation of trust on which long-term participation in ensuring global stability is built. This model allows countries to avoid geopolitical pressure while accumulating diplomatic capital. It should be emphasised that the application of each of these strategies is not mutually exclusive, and in practice, small states often combine elements of several approaches, adapting to the specific international context. For example, Switzerland combines neutrality with humanitarian activity, and Estonia combines expert specialisation with participation in networked security structures (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia, n.d.). Typology allows not only to classify diplomatic approaches, but also to identify the logic of strategic choice, which is determined by a combination of internal resources and external opportunities for influence.

Practical application of asymmetric diplomacy strategies. In the context of forming a new paradigm for the participation of small and medium-sized states in global governance, attention should be paid to the experience of countries such as Norway, Qatar and Singapore. They

represent three different types of international activity, demonstrating the effectiveness of alternative strategies of diplomatic behaviour based not on military-political domination, but on functional specialisation, adaptability and soft power. Norway is one of the most striking examples of mediation and humanitarian diplomacy. Without significant geopolitical influence or demographic advantage, this state has been able to carve out its own niche in global politics by institutionalising its participation in peace processes. Norway's efforts as a neutral mediator have contributed to the resolution of several international conflicts, such as the civil war in Sri Lanka, the peace process in Colombia, and the Israeli-Palestinian settlement (Pajo, 2018). In all these cases, Norway used a model of so-called "humanitarian activity with limited political risk," combining official diplomacy with the active participation of non-governmental organisations. In particular, the activities of platforms such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (n.d.) have made it possible to mobilise academic, analytical and field expertise. This symbiosis of state and non-state actors creates a unique "Norwegian format" – humanitarian-oriented, inclusive, and at the same time politically relevant. This approach allows Norway not only to build trust among the parties to the conflict, but also to enhance its global authority without resorting to coercion or economic pressure.

Unlike Norway, Qatar pursues a strategy of active involvement in regional conflicts, using tools of information and economic influence. The Al Jazeera media resource plays a key role in this, acting not only as a means of communication but also as an element in shaping public discourse in the Arab world and beyond. Qatar's information diplomacy has a clearly defined geopolitical vector aimed at strengthening the position of this small but economically influential state as a regional arbiter. Qatar has participated in mediation between Sudan and Chad, in the peaceful settlement in Darfur, and in negotiations between Israel and Hamas – the Islamic Resistance Movement (Adachi, 2024). These examples demonstrate not

only the active use of influence diplomacy, but also flexibility in interacting with different types of actors – state, parastatal and non-state. In addition to its information resources, Qatar widely uses so-called “wallet diplomacy,” which manifests itself in the active financing of infrastructure, humanitarian, and reconstruction projects in conflict zones (Al-Mohannadi, 2024). This approach allows Doha to act not only as a donor, but as a full-fledged geo-economic player whose participation in conditions of resource scarcity can determine the trajectory of political settlement. Thus, Qatar combines elements of soft and hard power through channels of financing, media influence and situational mediation. Singapore, on the other hand, demonstrates a model of expert and technocratic diplomacy based on neutrality, institutional flexibility and a high degree of economic integration into global markets. Singapore does not seek direct mediation in armed conflicts, but instead provides a platform for economic and security dialogue. It is an active participant and organiser of numerous international economic forums, such as the Singapore FinTech Festival (n.d.) and the Shangri-La Dialogue (n.d.), a leading platform for security analysis in

the Asia-Pacific region. As a result, Singapore acts as a hub between the West and the East, providing a neutral infrastructure for strategic dialogue between competing geopolitical blocs. At the same time, Singaporean diplomacy is characterised by a multi-level presence in international structures, including active participation in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN, n.d.) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC, n.d.). Such multi-vector activity allows the country to remain outside acute geopolitical conflicts, while maintaining its reputation as a reliable partner in regional and global processes. In addition, the Singaporean government cultivates a form of “expert diplomacy”, in which the state acts as an exporter of management decisions and institutional models that are often used by other countries in the processes of state building and modernisation. The experience of these countries shows that in the 21st century, “power” in global politics is increasingly determined not by the number of tanks or population, but by the ability to shape discourse, promote dialogue and act as a source of stability in a fragmented world. A comparison of the key characteristics of these countries’ climate strategies is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparative characteristics of the climate strategies of Norway, Qatar and Singapore

Criterion	Norway	Qatar	Singapore
Objectives	Leadership in global climate governance; export of sustainable technologies; strengthening of peacekeeping role; promotion of human rights	Confirmation of international legitimacy; diversification of the image of an energy state; strengthening of positions as a regional mediator	Ensuring resilience in the face of climate change; digital transformation of sustainability; promoting innovation in the global economy
Means	Financing of climate projects in the Global South; green bonds; peacekeeping missions; support for international NGOs	Organisation of climate forums; “green” investments in Western countries; use of Al Jazeera to shape the international agenda	Smart city strategies; emissions regulation; ESG financing; promoting financial and technology service hubs
Information and media dimension	Public diplomacy through cultural and scientific programmes; transparent communication on foreign policy initiatives	Al Jazeera as a global media tool; information positioning on crisis issues	Using digital platforms to promote sustainability; international conferences and exhibitions
Humanitarian and mediation dimension	Mediation in conflicts (Colombia, Sri Lanka); humanitarian programmes through the Norwegian Refugee Council	Mediation in conflicts in the Middle East and Africa; financing humanitarian initiatives	Humanitarian aid in the ASEAN region; expert support on sustainable development issues
Economic dimension	Investment in clean technologies; development of a “green” economy; marine energy projects	Sovereign investment funds for global diversification; support for innovative start-ups	International financial services; engagement of technology corporations; innovative industrial clusters
Institutional dimension	Active participation in the UNFCCC; REDD+ initiative; participation in international courts and human rights bodies	Participation in COP processes; membership in specialised international organisations	Role in the Climate Action Data Trust; activity in security forums (Shangri-La Dialogue)
Results	Reputation as a “green” state; attracting investment; technological partnership; strengthening diplomatic influence	Partial reduction of criticism regarding fossil fuel exports; image diplomacy; strengthening of role as mediator	Formation of an Asian model of climate security; growth of innovative capital; increasing global attractiveness
Form of asymmetry	Financial and moral advantage in supporting developing countries	Geo-economic compensation for emissions; shift in focus to future innovations	Technological asymmetry, local adaptability and rapid implementation of changes

Source: compiled by the author based on A. Torvanger *et al.* (2021), A. Al-Mohannadi (2024), S. Darma *et al.* (2025), UNFCCC. (n.d.a), (UNFCCC, n.d.b), (UNFCCC, n.d.c), Cities Alliance (n.d.), Climate Action Data Trust. (n.d.)

A common feature of all three states is the predominance of asymmetric, “soft” instruments of influence over formal mechanisms of global regulation. They operate within a zone of flexible norms, without claiming

dominance, but consistently promoting their own interests as part of global climate ethics. At the same time, each country implements its own model: Norway through moral and financial legitimacy, Qatar through geo-economic

adaptation, and Singapore through innovative infrastructuring of climate solutions. In the system of international relations, small states are increasingly seeking to participate in global mediation and conflict resolution processes. However, their participation is accompanied by a number of challenges and risks that can significantly affect both the effectiveness of their actions and internal political stability. One of the key challenges is information vulnerability, which consists in the openness of small states to the influences of the global information space, disinformation campaigns and cyber operations that may be aimed at delegitimising the mediation mission or internal political destabilisation. Unlike large states, small states do not have sufficient resources to counter large-scale information attacks, especially if they originate from systemic international players. Another challenge is political and economic pressure from large states interested in preserving or transforming the conflict to their own advantage. Small states that try to act as neutral mediators are often forced to balance between conflicting parties, which is complicated when one or more large states directly or indirectly support one of the parties. Norway, as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian settlement within the Oslo process, was under constant scrutiny from the United States, which was Israel's main strategic ally (Stensland, 2023). Thus, pressure from major powers limits the autonomy of small countries in promoting their own mediation strategies and sometimes imposes an agenda that does not correspond to the real needs of the conflict.

Another significant risk is associated with possible reputational losses in the event of a failure of the peace process or the perception of the mediator as biased. A reputation for neutrality and objectivity is a key asset for any state claiming the role of mediator, and its loss can have long-term consequences in both foreign and domestic policy. For example, Qatar, which is actively involved in mediation processes in the Middle East and Africa, has been repeatedly criticised for its ties to certain Islamist groups, which has undermined its credibility as a neutral mediator in certain conflicts, particularly in Darfur (Sharofiddinov, 2024). Thus, participation in conflict mediation may not only fail to produce the desired results, but also undermine the state's authority in the international arena and create political risks for its government. Evaluating the applicability of strategies tested by individual small states, it can be concluded that there is no universal recipe for successful mediation. However, certain structural approaches, as seen in the examples of Norway, Qatar, and Singapore, may be relevant for other small states, provided they are adapted to the local and regional context. First and foremost, strategies of "active neutrality," which combine diplomatic restraint with proactive foreign policy, have proven effective in building trust between parties to a conflict. Such strategies allow small states to minimise the risks of political pressure and remain flexible in responding to the dynamics of the conflict. In addition, small states can effectively apply an "institutional strategy" that involves the creation of specialised mediation centres, analytical structures and forums for informal dialogue. For example, the creation of the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (n.d.) or the Qatar Centre for Peace and Democracy (n.d.) has become a

tool for accumulating experience, knowledge and network contacts that enable the sustainability of mediation initiatives. In general, a small state's strategy in the field of international mediation should be multi-level: combining neutrality and proactivity, official negotiations and informal formats, external diplomacy and internal resistance to informational and political influences. A key factor for success is also long-term investment in reputation, which allows a country to remain an influential player in peacebuilding processes even after temporary setbacks. Thus, the experience of selected states can be used as a heuristic model by other small countries seeking to play a constructive role in conflict transformation, provided that they understand the challenges and develop an adaptive institutional framework.

Discussion

In the course of the study, it was established that the asymmetric diplomacy of small states serves as an effective strategy for overcoming structural constraints and transforming them into advantages. A comparison of the results with the works of other authors revealed both points of convergence and significant differences in approaches and conclusions. When comparing the findings of this research with those of S.W. de Goede (2021), a shared emphasis was identified on the role of mediation as a flexible tool for conflict resolution, which does not necessarily require formalised legal procedures. However, while S.W. de Goede's work focused on the theoretical legitimization of mediation in public international law, particularly in disputes with uncertain legal status, the present study analysed its practical application by small states – such as Norway, Qatar, and Switzerland – as an instrument of asymmetric diplomacy. Both approaches confirmed the effectiveness of mediation in contexts of limited hard power, yet this study concentrated on the institutional and reputational mechanisms that ensured the legitimacy of small states actions. The study by S. Milton *et al.* (2025) demonstrated that Qatar, following the Gulf crisis, transformed its mediation approaches while maintaining an orientation toward effectiveness and international reputation. J. Charles (2024) addressed the challenges of the digital era for the diplomatic activity of small states, particularly the need for constant retraining, adaptability, and mastery of digital tools. The conclusions of this study confirmed this trend but approached it from a systemic perspective: digitalisation was analysed as one of the directions of transforming the instruments of asymmetric diplomacy, enhancing soft power and increasing the influence of small states without reliance on traditional resources. While J. Charles focused on the skills and personal adaptability of diplomats, the present study framed digital diplomacy as part of institutional innovative potential. In the work of M. Tempestini (2024), the application of political game theory was proposed to improve the strategic forecasting of diplomatic decisions, which could potentially enhance the effectiveness of negotiation processes.

Within the present study, the necessity of strategic thinking for small states was also recognised, but the emphasis was placed not on formalised modelling, but on the empirical analysis of already applied asymmetric strategies. Both approaches acknowledged the need for

multidimensional analysis of foreign policy processes, though the current research favoured a realistic assessment of the dynamics of flexible positioning by small states within specific international contexts. The study by M. Fiala (2019) addressed the issue of hybrid threats and the role of small states in ensuring their own security through a multi-layered approach that included social resilience, information protection, and strategic alliances. The present study concurred with this view, highlighting informational vulnerability as one of the critical challenges in implementing asymmetric strategies. Both analyses concluded that small states could transform structural limitations into advantages, provided that they systematically utilised available institutional and social resources. However, while M. Fiala's work was dominated by a security perspective, the present study demonstrated a broader spectrum of strategies, including humanitarian, cultural, and technological approaches as instruments of asymmetric diplomacy. In the broader context of researching the asymmetric diplomacy of small states, particular analytical value was provided by the results of two studies – I. Bary (2022) and A. Al-Obaidan (2022) – which expanded the understanding of the mechanisms employed by small states to influence and shape international order, despite the limited availability of traditional power resources. The study by I. Bary (2022) focused on a comparative analysis of Norway's and Qatar's models of international mediation, highlighting the distinction between norm-oriented and interest-oriented approaches to peacemaking. The analysis centred on motivations, institutional capacities, and strategic advantages that provided each state with a unique niche in conflict resolution. These findings resonated with the results of the present research, which also confirmed that small states pursued different models of asymmetric diplomacy based on internal characteristics and external environments. As in Bary's analysis, the study demonstrated Norway's effectiveness in humanitarian mediation, grounded in institutional reputation and trust, and Qatar's pragmatism in deploying financial and political resources. At the same time, the current research expanded the analytical horizon by situating mediation within a broader framework – including small states' participation in international organisations, institution-building, and climate diplomacy. Another significant distinction lay in the conceptualisation of "asymmetric diplomacy" as a wider category encompassing not only mediation but also institutional influence, soft power, and expert presence. In this sense, while Bary's work provided an in-depth exploration of a specific field of small-state diplomacy, the present study presented a systemic approach to asymmetric strategies as a multidimensional phenomenon. The research of A. Al-Obaidan (2022) concentrated on assessing the "soft power" strategies of Qatar and Singapore, presenting them as the core of small-state foreign policy. The author persuasively argued that for both states, cultural diplomacy, international education, sporting events, and technological innovation were not peripheral but central instruments of global influence.

These conclusions aligned closely with the findings of current study, which also showed how small states transform their structural limitations into advantages through the active use of intangible resources. In both accounts,

the case of Singapore was highlighted as a particularly effective example due to its strategic focus and institutional stability. However, the present research went further by embedding "soft power" into the wider framework of asymmetric diplomacy, interpreting it not merely as a cultural-communicative instrument but as part of a comprehensive global positioning strategy. Compared to A. Al-Obaidan's analysis, the study devoted greater attention to institutional formats of participation in global governance and demonstrated how institutionalised presence complemented "soft power". An important addition of this research was the emphasis on the informational and political risks faced by small states, as well as the adaptive mechanisms that enabled them to maintain stability and influence in a volatile multipolar environment – issues not fully addressed in A. Al-Obaidan's study. The comparison with both works demonstrated that, despite differences in focus, all underscored the ability of small states to deploy non-traditional tools of foreign policy. Yet this research deepened the understanding by showing the complex nature of asymmetric diplomacy, which encompassed institutional engagement, expert interaction, information platforms, and specialised climate initiatives. Even in global domains such as climate change, small states acted proactively – for instance, through programmes like REDD+, SIDS, or the Climate Action Data Trust – thereby highlighting their ability not only to adapt but also to shape the global agenda. A comparison with previous studies also made it possible to clearly outline the challenges faced by small states, in particular information vulnerability and pressure from major actors. However, the study demonstrated that the effectiveness of asymmetric diplomacy depended primarily on institutional innovation, long-term investment in reputation, and strategic positioning, which allowed small states to act as independent subjects of international politics even in conditions of structural inequality.

Conclusions

Based on the research, it was found that asymmetric diplomacy of small states in a multipolar world order has proven its effectiveness as an alternative model of foreign policy behaviour that transforms structural constraints into strategic advantages. The theoretical analysis of the concept of asymmetric diplomacy revealed its significant differences from traditional paradigms of power, in particular the emphasis on indirect mechanisms of influence, such as institutional participation, expert diplomacy, mediation and cultural influence, which made it possible to rethink the role of small states in the international system. The study confirmed that the limited territorial, demographic and economic resources of small states were often compensated for by flexibility in decision-making, the ability to adapt quickly and highly specialised expertise, which created unique conditions for their participation in global governance. The examples of countries such as Norway, Qatar, Singapore, Switzerland and Costa Rica illustrated the diversity of asymmetric diplomacy strategies, including humanitarian, expert, subversive and neutral models, each based on specific internal capabilities and the external environment. Practical analysis showed that institutional activity in international organisations

became a key tool for compensating for the lack of hard power, providing small states with a platform to influence the formation of global norms and standards. The study of cases of Norway's mediation activities in Colombia and Sri Lanka, Qatar in conflicts in the Middle East, and Switzerland as a neutral arbitrator confirmed that small states could achieve significant influence through a combination of moral authority, technical competence, and long-term investment in reputation.

Separately, it was found that Norway combined mediation diplomacy with active climate policy, using financial instruments and institutional platforms to promote the sustainable development agenda. Qatar, alongside its role as a mediator in conflicts, actively invested in international sports, media and climate projects as a tool for image diplomacy and diversification of influence. Singapore, relying on technological innovation and financial stability, has built strategies that combine smart city approaches, digital security and climate sustainability, securing its role as a regional innovation hub. However, the study also identified significant challenges faced by small states in implementing asymmetric strategies, including information vulnerability, political pressure from large states and reputational risks, which limited their operational space and required additional adaptation mechanisms. A comparative analysis of the climate strategies of Norway,

Qatar and Singapore showed that even in the face of global challenges such as climate change, small states were able to develop unique approaches based on their competitive advantages, ranging from financial support to technological innovation. Thus, the results of the study confirm the hypothesis that small states such as Qatar, Norway and Singapore effectively compensate for their limited traditional resources through institutional activity (participation in international organisations, mediation, expert networks), transforming it into a key instrument of diplomatic influence. This proves that in a multipolar environment, institutional flexibility and specialisation are decisive factors in achieving the strategic goals of small states. Further research could expand the comparative analysis to include countries with different levels of institutional effectiveness and explore the impact of digital technologies on asymmetric diplomacy.

Acknowledgements

None.

Funding

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

References

- [1] Adachi, Y. (2024). *Competition vs. cooperation in multilateral mediation: Exploring the transition in Egypt and Qatar's mediation tactics in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*. (Master's thesis, Central European University, Vienna, Austria). doi: 10.13140/RG.2.2.35296.49927.
- [2] Aizenberh, T. (2024). Artificial intelligence technologies in international management. *University Economic Bulletin*, 19(1), 34-43. doi: 10.69587/ueb/1.2024.34.
- [3] Albreki, A.S.S.M. (2025). *The impact of public diplomacy on soft power strategy: Moderating role of media and communication*. (Doctoral thesis, University of Cordoba, Cordoba, Spain).
- [4] Al-Khulaifi, K. (2024). *The smart power of small states: An in-depth study of Qatar*. (Doctoral thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia). doi: 10.25911/2S5E-6F48.
- [5] Al-Mohannadi, A.M.M. (2024). *Mediation as a peaceful means of conflict resolution: The experience of the State of Qatar*. (Master's thesis, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Doha, Qatar).
- [6] Al-Obaidan, A.J.Y. (2022). *Soft power shaping the foreign policy of small states: A comparative study between Qatar and Singapore*. (Doctoral dissertation, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar).
- [7] APEC. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.apec.org/>.
- [8] ASEAN. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://agreement.asean.org/home.html>.
- [9] Barkho, L. (2019). Editorial policies and news discourse – how Al Jazeera's implicit guidelines shape its coverage of Middle East conflicts. *Journalism*, 22(6), 1357-1374. doi: 10.1177/1464884919841797.
- [10] Bary, I. (2022). *Low-leverage states in international mediation: A comparative case study of Norway and Qatar*. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom).
- [11] Bykova, A. (2024). *What the Arctic means to NATO*. In F. Güçyetmez & J.R. Dmello (Eds.), *Arctic 8 policy: Reassessing international relations* (pp. 15-44). London: Transnational Press London.
- [12] Charles, J. (2024). *Rethinking diplomacy: How small states can leverage new media for the conduct of diplomacy in the digital age*. (Master's thesis, University of Malta, Msida, Malta).
- [13] Cities Alliance. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.citiesalliance.org/>.
- [14] Climate Action Data Trust. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://climateactiondata.org/>.
- [15] Darma, S., Fithria, A., Ainy, R.N., & Amalia, D. (2025). Integrating ESG into regional government financial reporting: Insights from Jakarta's smart city initiatives. *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science*, 1524, article number 012010. doi: 10.1088/1755-1315/1524/1/012010.
- [16] de Goede, S.W. (2021). *Application of mediation in international disputes resolution: Reconsidering mediation for the growing complexity and diversity of international disputes*. (Master's thesis, Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea).
- [17] Echendu, A.J. (2022). Adapting the Singapore model to Nigeria's urban management: Possibilities and challenges. *Region*, 9(1), 115-133. doi: 10.18335/region.v9i1.359.
- [18] Education Finland. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.educationfinland.fi/>.

- [19] Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). (2025). *Neutrality*. Retrieved from <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/fdfa/foreign-policy/international-law/neutrality.html>.
- [20] Fiala, M. (2019). *Lilliputians and the amorphous giant: Small states' opportunities facing the hybrid threat*. (Master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, USA).
- [21] Gehrmann, A. (2022). *Emerging smart power in the Gulf Region – Qatar's foreign policy nexus*. (Master's thesis, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands).
- [22] Gold, J. (2019). *How Estonia uses cybersecurity to strengthen its position in NATO*. Retrieved from <https://icds.ee/en/how-estonia-uses-cybersecurity-to-strengthen-its-position-in-nato/>.
- [23] International Institute for Strategic Studies. (n.d.). *IISS Shangri-La dialogue*. Retrieved from <https://www.iiss.org/events/iiss-shangri-la-dialogue/>.
- [24] Lakshminarayanan, R. (2021). The multipolar world and small states: Emerging perspectives in India-Kuwait strategic partnerships. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 15(2), 289–308. doi: 10.1080/25765949.2021.1940016.
- [25] Long, T., & Long, T.S. (2022). *A small state's guide to influence in world politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [26] Milton, S., Elkahoul, G., & Tariq, S. (2025). Qatar's evolving role in conflict mediation. *Mediterranean Politics*, 30(1), 53–77. doi: 10.1080/13629395.2023.2266665.
- [27] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Estonia. (n.d.). *Cybersecurity cooperation – regional activities*. Retrieved from <https://vm.ee/en/activity/digital-and-cyber-diplomacy/cybersecurity-cooperation>.
- [28] Mohamed, A. (2025). Qatari peace mediation and humanitarian aid in Sudan: Lessons from the war in Darfur 2003–2022. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 20(1), 86–99. doi: 10.1177/15423166241312874.
- [29] Murphy, S. (2019). *Ireland and NATO: Challenges and opportunities*. Retrieved from <https://ams.hi.is/en/publication/81>.
- [30] NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://ccdcoe.org/>.
- [31] Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF). (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.devex.com/organizations/norwegian-centre-for-conflict-resolution-noref-151296>.
- [32] Norwegian Refugee Council. (n.d.). *NORDEM: Expert deployment for human rights, democracy, and peace*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrc.no/expert-deployment/nordem2>.
- [33] Oztuna, A. (2024). An analytical study of the evolving role of third-party mediators in international conflicts: A comparative examination of diplomatic interventions. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Humanities, Legal Studies and International Relations*, 8(1), 155–172. doi: 10.48028/iiprds/ijshrli.v8.i1.11.
- [34] Pajo, J. (2018). *Minor players in a major game – the success of Sweden and Norway as mediators*. (Master's thesis, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania).
- [35] Pedi, R., & Wivel, A. (2022). What future for small states after unipolarity? Strategic opportunities and challenges in the post-American world order. In N. Græger, B. Heurlin, O. Wæver, & A. Wivel (Eds.), *Polarity in international relations* (127–147). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-05505-8_7.
- [36] Qatar Centre for Peace and Democracy. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://qatarcpd.com/>.
- [37] Ramjit, D.M. (2025). Global diplomacy in a multipolar era. *Law, Economics and Society*, 1(1), 107–114. doi: 10.30560/les.v1n1p107.
- [38] Ruhe, C. (2020). Impeding fatal violence through third-party diplomacy: The effect of mediation on conflict intensity. *Journal of Peace Research*, 58(4), 687–701. doi: 10.1177/0022343320930072.
- [39] Sahlberg, P. (2021). *Finnish lessons 3.0: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- [40] Samha, H. (2023). *Soft power as small state's foreign policy strategy: The cases of Qatar and Singapore*. (Master's thesis, Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan).
- [41] Sharofiddinov, O. (2024). *Qatar's mediation diplomacy: Its role in Middle East conflict resolution*. *Modern Science and Research*, 3(10), 515–522.
- [42] Singapore FinTech Festival. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.fintechfestival.sg/>.
- [43] Solís, L.G. (2022). *Costa Rica – the demilitarisation of politics: An exceptional story*. In K. Kruijt & K. Koonings (Eds.), *Latin American military and politics in the twenty-first century: A cross-national analysis* (pp. 76–88). London: Routledge.
- [44] Stănescu, M. (2024). A small state's security strategy in a changing world – Republic of Moldova case study. *Scientific Bulletin*, 29(2), 307–316. doi: 10.2478/bsaft-2024-0031.
- [45] Stensland, F.L. (2023). What role did Norway really play in the Oslo process? A case study in small-state mediation. *Israel Studies Review*, 38(2), 30–47. doi: 10.3167/isr.2023.380204.
- [46] Tempestini, M. (2024). *Game theory and diplomatic effectiveness: A pathway to resolving international conflicts*. (Master's thesis, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Venice, Italy).
- [47] Thune, H. (Ed.). (2015). *Dialogue and conflict resolution: Potential and limits*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- [48] Torvanger, A., Maltais, A., & Marginean, I. (2021). Green bonds in Sweden and Norway: What are the success factors? *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 324, article number 129177. doi: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2021.129177.
- [49] Turunen, S. (2020). Humanitarian diplomatic practices. *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 15(4), 459–487. doi: 10.1163/1871191X-BJA10008.
- [50] UNFCCC. (n.d.a). *Conference of the Parties (COP)*. Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>.
- [51] UNFCCC. (n.d.b). *What is REDD+?* Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/topics/land-use/workstreams/redd/what-is-redd>.

- [52] UNFCCC. (n.d.c). *What is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change?* Retrieved from <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/what-is-the-united-nations-framework-convention-on-climate-change>.
- [53] United Nations Development Programme. (n.d.). *Small island developing states*. Retrieved from <https://www.undp.org/latin-america/small-island-developing-states>.
- [54] Womack, B. (2016). *Asymmetry and international relationships*. New York: Cambridge University Press.