

Methodological Concepts in Small States Research: Introducing the Geopolitical Power Index Framework

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Abstract

In recent years, the study of small states has gained increasing attention in the field of international relations and geopolitics. These states, often overlooked in traditional analyses dominated by great powers, may play a significant role in shaping global affairs of a multipolar order. However, existing methodological frameworks for studying small states dynamics often fall short in capturing the complexities of their geopolitical behaviour and potential in their global power dynamics. To address this gap, this paper presents a methodological concept of the Geopolitical Power Index which was originally developed for Routledge Small States Series book (Car & Zorko, 2025). The main aim here is to test it across different disciplines and methodological approaches common for research in the area of geopolitics and International Relations. This paper debates on usage of indexation in geopolitical analysis and purpose of such indexes for future research. Unlike traditional power that primarily focus on military capabilities or economic strength, the GPI Framework considers a broader range of factors relevant to small states, including geographical positioning, diplomatic influence, digitalization readiness, and resilience to cyber threats. The GPI framework enables comparative analysis across different small states, allowing researchers to identify patterns and trends within diverse group of countries.

Key Words:

Geopolitical Power Index, GPI framework, small states, Routledge Small States Book Series

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Introduction

In the vast landscape of geopolitical theory, the spotlight has historically been dominated by the great powers (Mackinder, 1919; Spykman, 1942; Kennedy, 1989; Kissinger, 1994; Huntington, 1996; Brzezinski, 1997; Mearsheimer, 2001; Zakaria, 2008; Kagan, 2013; Allison, 2017). The name itself – Great Game – suggest that only big players are allowed to participate. The Great Game often include analysis on actions and reactions of great powers instead of focusing on balance of power in International Relations or even minor roles that small(er) states may play in international arena. This focus stems from the traditional view that these large, powerful states are the primary architects of international order and the main drivers of global political dynamics. Theories and models developed by prominent geopolitical scholars, Mackinder's Heartland Theory (1904; 1919) or Mahan's Sea Power concept (1890), predominantly emphasize the strategic maneuverers of large states. As a result, the geopolitical discourse has often overlooked the significant roles and capabilities of small states in shaping the global order.

The traditional neglect of small states can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the classical understanding of power in geopolitics is rooted in tangible assets such as military strength, economic clout, and territorial expanse—metrics by which small states often fall short. This has led to a pervasive underestimation of their potential impact on international relations. Additionally, the realist school of thought, which has heavily influenced geopolitical theory, tends to prioritize the study of power politics among major states, reinforcing the marginalization of smaller nations. However, this traditional perspective is increasingly at odds with contemporary geopolitical realities. In an era marked by rapid technological advancements, globalization, and the proliferation of digital spaces, the influence of small states cannot be further ignored. Small states often possess unique strategic advantages, such as agility in diplomatic maneuvers (Luša & Picula, 2025), the ability to forge niche economic roles, and the capacity to act as mediators in international conflicts. Furthermore, the rise of cyber capabilities and digital diplomacy provides small states with new avenues to exert influence and alter geopolitical dynamics. For example, Estonia's pioneering efforts in e-governance and cybersecurity have positioned it as a global leader in digital innovation, despite its small size (Puusalu, 2025; Mikac et al, 2025). Similarly, countries like Malta (Grech & Debattista; 2025) and Iceland (Kos-Stanišić et al, 2025) have leveraged their strategic positions and specialized sectors to punch above their weight in international affairs. These examples underscore the need for a revised geopolitical framework that

acknowledges the significant, albeit different, forms of power potential wielded by small states.

While great powers undoubtedly play a crucial role in shaping the global order, the capabilities and contributions of small states must not be overlooked. By expanding the scope of geopolitical analysis to include the strategic behaviours and innovative approaches of small states, scholars and policymakers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary international landscape. This shift in perspective is essential for recognizing the multifaceted nature of power in the 21st century and for fostering a more inclusive and accurate representation of global geopolitical dynamics and multipolar World. Bearing in mind multiple “new” subjects arisen, small states are also one of them, but in old traditional nation-state centric way. In the evolving landscape of global politics, the emergence of a multipolar world order is reshaping the dynamics of international relations both with new subjects as well as under new processes and in new unconventional dimensions.

This paper offers insights on already developed Geopolitical Power Index (Car & Zorko, 2025). The existing index combines different geopolitical factors and recognized “four key categories for analysis of geopolitical power – geographical power; social and political power; economy power; and military power. While first factor is rather easy to present, later three should be represented by combination of indexes and qualitative interpretation of existing data and indicators” (Car & Zorko, 2025: 4). Moreover, the fifth category in a form of cyber-power was tested as a stand-alone factor for future research through case-study oriented part of the book. But, following Nuno Morgado (2023: 15) re-thinking on power, stating that “power and potential are two different concepts” one must consider this power-divide as a factor for itself. As further explained (ibidem) “power depends on potential; i.e., power is “inferior” to potential in the sense that there will always be a waste of, or mismanagement of, resources in the process of their extraction and operationalization. Consequently, power is the revelation of potential in a particular space and time. It follows that if the assessment of potential is demanding, the full-scale apprehension of power before it is revealed in its course of action is virtually unachievable”. Power depends on potential, meaning that without the underlying resources or capacities, power cannot be exerted. However, power is considered “inferior” to potential because not all potential can be perfectly converted into power. In that sense, actual power potential, rather than power itself should be a scope for wider framework. There is also another dimension to consider in a form of the will to act. One might have both potential and power but without will to act there are no actual changes in power dynamics.

The role of small states in multipolar world

Traditionally overshadowed by great powers, small states are increasingly asserting their influence and redefining their roles on the global stage. This shift is driven by a combination of strategic adaptability, technological advancements, and the fluid nature of modern geopolitical alliances. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent decline of bipolarity marked the beginning of this transformation. The power vacuum left by the diminishing dominance of the United States and the Soviet Union created opportunities for new actors to emerge. In a multipolar world, power is distributed among multiple states, including emerging powers like China, India, and Brazil. This diffusion of power has inadvertently provided small states with more room to manoeuvre and assert their influence. Technological advancements, particularly in the realms of digitalization and cybersecurity, have further levelled the playing field. Small states like Estonia and Singapore have harnessed their technological prowess to become leaders in e-governance and digital innovation, setting global standards and influencing international policies. These states have demonstrated that size is no longer a determinant of influence; rather, it is the ability to innovate and adapt that defines a state's role in the contemporary world. Small states have also excelled in niche diplomacy and multilateral engagement. Countries such as Norway and Switzerland have established themselves as key mediators in international conflicts, leveraging their perceived neutrality and diplomatic agility. Moreover, the strategic importance of small states has been amplified by their geographic positions. States like Qatar and the UAE, situated in geopolitically critical regions, have used their resources and strategic locations to become pivotal players in regional politics. Their roles in energy markets, financial sectors, and as hubs for international dialogue further underscore their rising influence.

Small states are typically defined by factors such as their population size and geographical area. However, there is no universally accepted definition, and scholars often employ a range of criteria to classify states as “small” (Crowards, 2002; Maass, 2008; 2009). Research on small states encompasses a wide range of topics, including their security strategies, diplomatic behavior, economic policies, and regional dynamics (Goetschel, 1998; Ingebritsen et al., 2006; Thorhallsson & Wivel, 2006; Briguglio, 2016; Baldacchino & Wivel, 2020). Scholars examine how small states navigate the complexities of the international system, form alliances, and pursue their national interests in a world dominated by larger powers (O Tuathail et al., 1998; Walton, 2007; Grey & Sloan, 2014; Dittmer & Sharp, 2014; Morgado, 2021; Baldacchino, 2023). But often not from the perspective of small states ability to change or influence the change in global world order but from the perspective how

to cope in/with existing one. For instance, there is a book “Small States in World Politics: Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior” (2003) edited by Jeanne A.K. Hey explores the foreign policy strategies of small states in various regions of the world and provides theoretical frameworks for understanding their behaviour in the international arena. Furthermore, book “Geopolitics of the Knowledge-Based Economy” (2019) by Sami Moisio examines the geopolitical implications of the knowledge-based economy, including the role of digital technologies in shaping power dynamics and international relations. The book “Digital Diplomacy: Theory and Practice” (2015) edited by Corneliu Bjola and Marcus Holmes is a book that examines the evolving role of digital technologies in diplomacy and international relations, including the use of social media, digital platforms, and cyber tools by states and non-state actors but not focusing on small states in particular. Finally, “The Diplomacies of Small States: Between Vulnerability and Resilience” (2009) by Andrew F. Cooper, Timothy M. Shaw is an in-depth analysis of the various methods used by small states to overcome their vulnerabilities in the international arena.

The concept of “small states” remains one of the most elusive and debated topics in geopolitical discourse. Despite extensive research and numerous theoretical frameworks, there is still no universally accepted definition of what constitutes a small state. This lack of a clear definition presents significant challenges for scholars, policymakers, and international organizations attempting to understand and address the unique issues faced by these states and potential roles they could play in global order. At the core of this definitional ambiguity is the complexity and diversity of criteria used to categorize states as “small”. Traditionally, size has been measured in terms of geographical area and population. However, these metrics alone fail to capture the multifaceted nature of state power and influence. For instance, many small states possess substantial economic clout, advanced technological capabilities, or significant geopolitical importance due to their strategic locations. These factors complicate simplistic size-based classifications and highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding.

Different academic disciplines offer varied definitions, further complicating the discourse. In international relations, small states are often defined by their limited ability to influence global politics and their dependence on larger states for security and economic stability. In contrast, economists might classify small states based on economic indicators such as GDP or market size, while political scientists might focus on institutional capacity and governance structures.

Moreover, the relative nature of smallness means that a state's classification can change over time or depending on the context. A country considered small in one

regional context might be viewed differently in another. Moreover, the “smallness” is interconnected to power potential as well.

The lack of a standard definition has practical implications. It affects the design and implementation of policies tailored to small states, potentially leading to ineffective or inappropriate measures. International organizations, such as the United Nations or the World Bank, often have to adapt their programs and support mechanisms to fit a broad range of state sizes and conditions, which can dilute the effectiveness of their interventions. Without a clear understanding of what constitutes a small state, it is challenging to form cohesive groups or alliances that can effectively lobby for their collective interests on the global stage. This fragmentation can weaken the position of small states in international negotiations and forums, where unified action is often necessary to influence outcomes. This definitional ambiguity complicates scholarly research, policy formulation, and international cooperation, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive and flexible approach to understanding the unique characteristics and needs of small states.

Methodology, Indexation, Power Categories, and Intent to Measure

In international relations (IR), indexation refers to the process of ranking or measuring countries or regions based on specific criteria. It typically involves the creation of indices that help in comparing various aspects of state behaviour, development, and power dynamics usually reserved for geopolitics. These indices can be focused on economic, political, military, environmental, or societal factors and are used to facilitate analysis and policy decisions. In geopolitics, the methodological use of indexes involves a systematic approach to quantifying and comparing different dimensions of state power, stability, or potential influence in relation to ability to influence or change world order. Researchers and policymakers employ these indexes to organize complex data into measurable indicators, allowing for the comparison of states or regions across specific variables such as military strength, economic resilience, or governance quality. Methodologically, this process begins by selecting relevant metrics, collecting data from reliable sources (e.g., international organizations or national reports), and then aggregating this information into composite scores that reflect broader geopolitical trends. The construction of these indexes often follows statistical techniques like normalization or weighting to ensure that diverse variables are comparable and reflective of real-world conditions. Analysts then use these indices to draw correlations, identify patterns, or inform models of prediction in geopolitical behaviour, enhancing decision-making in international arena. However, rigorous attention is paid to the

choice of indicators and data sources to minimize biases and ensure that the index accurately captures the complexities of the global landscape. However the use of multiple indexes are often needed to ensure more objective perspective.

While indexes in geopolitics offer valuable insights, they also face significant shortcomings that can undermine their reliability and applicability. One major limitation is the potential for bias and subjectivity in the selection and weighting of indicators, which can skew results toward particular political or ideological perspectives. Data availability and quality pose another challenge, as not all countries consistently provide reliable or transparent data, leading to gaps or inaccuracies that can misrepresent a nation's true standing. And finally, when comparing the power potential new subjects such as non-state actors or small states are often neglected. Additionally, indexes often oversimplify complex geopolitical dynamics by reducing multifaceted issues like governance, security, or economic resilience to a single score or rank, masking important regional or contextual nuances. The comparability of different countries or regions can also be problematic, as diverse political, social, or economic systems may not be adequately captured by universal metrics. Moreover, some indices rely heavily on historical data, which may not reflect current realities or rapidly shifting geopolitical landscapes, reducing their relevance for contemporary analysis. Consequently, while indexes provide useful frameworks, their results must be interpreted cautiously and supplemented with deeper, more qualitative analyses.

Indexes play a crucial role in a variety of other geopolitical methods, providing data-driven insights that enhance the rigor and in-depth of analysis. These methods span areas like power projection, conflict forecasting, risk assessment, and diplomatic strategy, where indexes serve as foundational tools for evaluating state capacity, vulnerabilities, and global influence. Moreover, indexes often serve as basis for sophisticated trajectories such as Scenario Analysis of Future Science. The use of indexes in scenario analysis offers framework for examining potential future developments in international arena. By providing structured, data-driven representations of various dimensions of state power, stability, or influence, indexes allow analysts to build multiple plausible scenarios for how global dynamics may evolve. These scenarios, which are narratives of possible future states, help policymakers, businesses, and scholars anticipate risks, identify opportunities, and develop strategies to manage uncertainty in an increasingly interconnected world.

In scenario planning, analysts typically select a set of key drivers that are most likely to influence the future trajectory of geopolitical dynamics. These drivers are represented by index scores, which provide a baseline for understanding current conditions. Analysts then explore how changes in these index values might interact

to produce different outcomes. For instance, if an index shows a country's economic capacity declining while its military expenditure index rises, this could lead to a scenario where internal pressure grows due to economic hardship, but the government prioritizes military strength over social welfare, increasing the risk of conflict or authoritarianism. Scenario analysis can thus help policymakers identify early warning signs of instability or conflict by tracking shifts in index values over time.

One of the most useful aspects of using indexes in scenario analysis is their ability to incorporate a wide range of factors and uncertainties. Indexes can reflect everything from shifts in economic growth patterns to climate change vulnerability or changing diplomatic relationships. Despite its strengths, there are challenges to using indexes in scenario analysis. Over-reliance on quantitative data can lead to oversimplification of complex dynamics, particularly when social or cultural factors that are harder to quantify play critical roles. Furthermore, the accuracy and timeliness of data used in indexes can affect the quality of scenarios. Outdated or incomplete data may lead to scenarios that do not fully capture the evolving nature of geopolitical risks. To mitigate this, scenario analysis should complement index data with qualitative insights and expert judgment.

In future studies—also known as futures analysis or foresight—indexes play a critical role in exploring potential global developments and preparing for a wide range of future scenarios. Futures studies aim to anticipate long-term trends and uncertainties by identifying key drivers of change, assessing emerging risks, and generating alternative futures. The use of indexes in this field allows researchers and policymakers to ground their analyses in data-driven insights, creating more robust and plausible models of the future. Future studies is a constantly evolving field, and there is growing interest in developing new indexes to better capture emerging global trends. For instance, there is increasing recognition of the need to index the impact of artificial intelligence on geopolitics or the role of data sovereignty in global power structures. The development of new indexes to measure these emerging areas would provide futurists with more accurate tools for predicting the future geopolitical environment. Moreover, indexes are increasingly being integrated with big data and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies in future studies, offering new ways to model complex geopolitical dynamics. Predictive algorithms, combined with real-time data from indexes, can be used to simulate future scenarios with higher levels of accuracy and detail.

The use of GPI framework

The Geopolitical Power Index (GPI) with cyber-power component added (GPI+C) offers a comprehensive and multidimensional framework for assessing state power potential, making it an invaluable tool for policymakers, analysts, scholars, and businesses alike. However, it is oriented solely towards small state research since the area for shifts in power (potential) are bigger in case of new emerging actors in IR. Its applications and benefits extend across strategic planning, comparative analysis, risk assessment, diplomatic and economic engagement, academic research, business investment, and international cooperation.

Governments can utilize the GPI for strategic planning and policy formulation. By understanding their strengths and weaknesses across the five categories of power, states can craft informed national security strategies, economic policies, and diplomatic initiatives. For instance, a state with robust cyber capabilities but limited military power might prioritize cybersecurity measures and digital diplomacy to enhance its international standing and security.

The GPI framework also enables comparative analysis between states, providing a nuanced understanding of how different countries measure up across various dimensions of power. This is particularly useful for identifying potential allies and competitors. Small states can compare their cyberpower and economic power with those of other small states or larger nations to find areas where they can collaborate or compete effectively. Analysts can employ the GPI for risk assessment and management, evaluating a state's performance in each category to identify potential threats such as economic dependency on a single resource, demographic challenges, or cybersecurity weaknesses. This comprehensive risk assessment facilitates better-prepared contingency plans and more resilient national strategies. The Index is particularly valuable for small states, which often face unique challenges and opportunities. By using it for strategic purposes, small states can identify their niche strengths, such as advanced cyber capabilities or strategic geographical positions, and leverage these in international forums.

Diplomatic missions and international organizations can leverage the Index to enhance their engagement strategies. Understanding a country's geopolitical power profile aids in crafting targeted diplomatic efforts and economic partnerships. For example, knowing that a particular state excels in economic power but lacks cyber capabilities might encourage investment in joint technological initiatives or cybersecurity collaborations. International organizations and coalitions can use it to identify areas for cooperation and capacity-building. Initiatives aimed at improving

cybersecurity in states with strong economic power but weak cyber defences can enhance collective security and foster international collaboration.

Beyond practical applications, the Geopolitical Power Index contributes to geopolitical theory and the measurement of power potential. It offers a holistic approach to understanding state power, moving beyond traditional metrics focused solely on military and economic strength. By incorporating dimensions like cyberpower reflects the complexities of modern territoriality and envisions of the place/space changes. This multidimensional perspective enriches theoretical discussions and provides a more accurate tool for measuring and comparing state power in an increasingly interconnected and digital world. This Index provides a structured methodology for research. Scholars and students of international relations and geopolitical studies can use it to conduct detailed case studies, comparative research, and theoretical analyses. Academic research can also benefit from the GPI Framework by providing a structured methodology for analysing the complex interactions between different dimensions of state power.

Conclusion

The study of small states in the context of geopolitics and international relations remains an essential yet complex field, underscored by the lack of a universally accepted definition. This complexity stems from the diverse criteria and multifaceted nature of state power and influence, which traditional metrics such as geographical size and population fail to capture adequately. As we have explored and presented in Routledge Small States Series book, the Geopolitical Power Index offers a nuanced framework for understanding and measuring the power of states, integrating categories like geographical power, social and political power, economic power, military power, and cyberpower. This comprehensive approach allows for a more accurate assessment of a state's capabilities and strategic importance, especially in a world increasingly influenced by digitalization and cyber dynamics.

The GPI's inclusion of cyberpower as a distinct category highlights the increasing importance of digital capabilities in the contemporary geopolitical landscape. As traditional notions of power are challenged by technological advancements, the ability to project influence in cyberspace becomes a critical component of national power (but not exclusively military power). This shift underscores the need for small states to invest in digital infrastructure and cybersecurity to enhance their resilience and strategic positioning.

The evolving geopolitical landscape, characterized by rapid digitalization and changing power dynamics, calls for innovative approaches to better understand and

navigate the complexities of contemporary international relations. As small states continue to play critical roles in regional and global contexts, their study will remain crucial for advancing geopolitical theory and practice, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced and effective engagement with the diverse new actors shaping the multipolar world order.

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