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**Small States of Europe in a Turbulent, Multipolar World Dominated
by Great Powers: Ensuring Security and Survival on the Path
to Development and Prosperity. On Hilmar Þór Hilmarsson's Book
*The Nordic, Baltic and Visegrád Small Powers in Europe:
A Dance with Giants for Survival and Prosperity***

Hilmarsson, H. Þ. (2023). *The Nordic, Baltic and Visegrád small powers in Europe: A dance with giants for survival and prosperity*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
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The book *The Nordic, Baltic and Visegrád Small Powers: A Dance with Giants for Survival and Prosperity* by Hilmar Þór Hilmarsson offers an interdisciplinary analysis of the role of small states in the evolving international order dominated by the rivalry of major powers such as the United States, China and Russia. Hilmarsson, a professor at the University of Akureyri (Iceland), seeks to address key questions concerning the strategies for the survival and development of small states that collaborate with each other within the frameworks of regional cooperation in Central Europe (the Visegrád Group – V4: Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary), Northern Europe (the Nordic countries: Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Iceland), and Eastern Europe (the Baltic states: Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) in the face of challenges related

to European integration, international security and global crises. The author poses numerous research questions:

- How can small European states survive and prosper within a multipolar world of great powers?
- What part should small states take in European integration? Does one size fit all?
- Do EU fiscal and monetary policies allow for Keynesian economic stimulus when needed, and are the euro area convergence criteria viable as the world recovers from the COVID-19 crisis?
- Are small state alliances within the EU useful to counterbalance the influence of the larger EU member states? How far should EU and NATO expansion go? Should it include countries such as Ukraine?
- Can the EU rely on a US-led NATO for its security?
- How should small states/powers relate to major powers influencing Europe, particularly the US, China, and Russia?
- Do smaller states need to choose a single ally among all the great powers?

The research questions show overlap, as exemplified by those addressing small states' relationships with major powers, such as the U.S., China, and Russia. This overlap can be refined by merging them into a single, cohesive question to streamline the inquiry and improve analytical clarity.

The book is structured into an introduction and eleven chapters, with the final chapter serving as a conclusion that includes policy implications. Each chapter provides a detailed analysis of specific issues, focusing on key problems and strategies of small European states. The initial chapters explore the unique characteristics of small states, their challenges in European integration, and their roles in regional and global institutions, while later sections analyze the influence of major powers such as the United States, China and Russia. The final chapters address EU membership-related challenges faced by small states and potential strategies for such states amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics. While the independent structure of the chapters allows flexibility in reading, enabling comprehensive engagement and selective exploration of topics, it also creates a drawback: a significant degree of repetition. As the author acknowledges in the introduction, "When reading the book from cover to cover, the reader will notice a certain amount of repetition" (Hilmarsson, 2023, p. 10). For instance, the recurring mention that only five of the analyzed countries are members of the Eurozone appears multiple times, detracting from the work's coherence and conciseness (Hilmarsson, 2023, pp. 1, 13, 20, 64, 164, 174, 187, 191).

A notable strength of *The Nordic, Baltic and Visegrád Small Powers: A Dance with Giants for Survival and Prosperity* lies in its interdisciplinary approach and rich analytical depth, combined with a focus on contemporary global challenges and their implications for small states. The author provides an extensive analysis of twelve small states, examining their strategies in shaping development aid, their participation in smaller regional

groupings (Nordic Cooperation, V4, Baltic Three) and larger frameworks (Three Sea Initiative), their roles in integration processes (European Union, Eurozone), military alliances (North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO), and multilateral institutions of the liberal international order (the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations, World Trade Organization, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), as well as their collaboration with major powers. Hilmarsson skillfully examines the effects of the 2008–2009 financial crisis on the fiscal and monetary policies of small states analyzed and the challenges of Eurozone convergence. He also addresses the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on small states. Furthermore, the author discusses the war in Ukraine, highlighting its implications for international security and the strategies of small states in Central, Northern and Eastern Europe. Through this lens, the book aligns with the most relevant debates on the future of European integration and the potential expansion of the European Union and NATO.

Another notable strength is the analysis of the US-China rivalry and its implications for small European states. Hilmarsson also engages with pivotal questions for Europe's future, such as whether the EU can continue to rely on the US for security or if it should pursue greater strategic autonomy. Notably, Hilmarsson presents three scenarios for how small states can promote their future economic prosperity and security: (i) the status quo scenario, (ii) the pivot to China scenario, and (iii) the pragmatic scenario. He further conducts a SWOT analysis for each scenario, identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats they present for the regions and the small states within them. However, one might question whether the pragmatic scenario is realistic – whether it is indeed possible to have one's cake and eat it too, as discussed below.

Despite its extensive analysis, the book lacks sufficient theoretical grounding. The author primarily relies on the liberal paradigm and three theories – democratic peace theory, economic interdependence theory, and liberal institutionalism – to explain state engagement in multilateral formats and the liberal international order established after 1989 under US hegemony (Hilmarsson, 2023, pp. 49–53). While this framework helps to elucidate why a liberal order under American dominance emerged after World War II, it falls short in addressing the book's central themes: how small states behave within this international system, navigate relationships with major powers, and create regional co-operation formats. These gaps limit the theoretical depth necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the core issues explored in the work. The works of scholars like Baldur Thorhallsson (2000, 2018, 2019; Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017) and Peter Katzenstein (2003, 2015), who focus on the strategies of small states in the international system, particularly in the context of globalization and European integration, are not referenced. Incorporating theories of small states would have provided a stronger foundation for the author's analytical conclusions.

Hilmarsson's recommendation – fostering relations with China, avoiding antagonizing the EU and the US while simultaneously maintaining security cooperation with the latter – is rooted in the concept of balancing relationships among great powers and

provides a pragmatic pathway for smaller states in the global system. However, this approach is not without its criticisms, particularly concerning the risks associated with over-reliance on balancing. Such policies may be perceived by great powers as indicative of a lack of loyalty or credibility, especially if great power competition escalates from rivalry to open confrontation. Maintaining a balanced position in a multipolar world poses significant challenges for small states and requires careful navigation to avoid unintended consequences. Maintaining a balanced position for small states in a multipolar world can be exceedingly challenging. Thorhallsson (2000), for instance, notes that for small states to succeed in balancing, they must be seen as credible and consistent in their policies. Furthermore, one dependency may be replaced by another. Additionally, a value divergence between China and European states – a point noted by Hilmarsson on pages 125, 127, 136 and 195 – can significantly hinder balancing efforts. From the perspective of small state theories, a more viable approach might involve strengthening the EU's defense and economic mechanisms to reduce dependency on the U.S. (for defense) and China (in economic terms).

It is also worth questioning some of the assumptions and conclusions presented by the author in the book. Hilmarsson repeatedly asserts that NATO enlargement was a primary reason for Russia's aggression against Ukraine. He argues for instance that "Russia strongly objects to Ukraine's proposed membership of NATO, and this was one of the main reasons for the Russian military build-up at Ukraine's borders and subsequent military invasion" (p. 141); "The expansion of both the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is at least partially responsible for growing tensions in the Russian Federation that contributed to that country's military invasion of Ukraine" (p. 159); and "The enlargement of the EU and NATO is one of the main reasons for the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, which in turn is having a devastating effect on Europe and harming the global economy" (p. 184). Similar claims are made on pages 112, 119, 121 and 148. The argument that NATO enlargement provoked Russia effectively legitimizes Russia's policy of dominating its neighboring states, and undermines Ukraine's sovereignty by shifting responsibility onto Western states rather than the aggressor. This claim oversimplifies the issue and overlooks the deeper motivations underlying Russian policy (Hughes, 2023). For instance, the 2008 Bucharest Declaration vaguely mentioned potential NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, was largely symbolic, and lacked a concrete Membership Action Plan (MAP). In this regard, the absence of substantive NATO actions weakens the assertion that enlargement directly caused the aggression. Moreover, the Kremlin has historically employed external conflicts as tools to consolidate power and divert public attention from domestic challenges. In this context, Russia's aggression against Ukraine can be seen as a calculated strategy to bolster Putin's authority amidst declining popularity and rising social unrest, as Ferraro argues (Ferraro, 2024).

The Nordic, Baltic and Visegrád Small Powers: A Dance with Giants for Survival and Prosperity offers a comprehensive analysis of the strategies of small states in an evolving

international order dominated by great power rivalries. The book stands out due to its interdisciplinary approach, rich analytical content, and engagement with current events, making it a valuable contribution to debates on the future of European integration and international security. While the publication provides an important perspective on the strategies of small states, it necessitates a critical evaluation of some of its assumptions and conclusions. For international relations and European politics scholars, the book serves as an inspiring source of insight, though its limitations highlight the need for further research in this area.

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