

# Realism, Small States and Neutrality

Written by Archie W. Simpson

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ARCHIE W. SIMPSON, FEB 5 2018

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Since the end of the Cold War, the policy and practice of neutrality has become unfashionable. Neutrality is an institution of non-partisanship that has been commonly practiced by many small states through the ages, ostensibly as a means to opt-out of the power politics of other states. In essence neutrality, 'is a legal condition through which a state declares non-involvement in a conflict or war, and indicates its intention to refrain from supporting or aiding either side' (Heywood 2015, 144), but it is also a political strategy. In tautological terms, neutrality means not becoming involved in wars either directly or indirectly. Yet, neutrality retains some relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in three important respects: there are several small states that retain neutrality, including Ireland and Switzerland; neutrality still provides some manifestation of security; it remains an option to avoid becoming embroiled in violent conflicts. Realists generally accept that neutral states exist but, 'are unable to provide a convincing explanation for the influence of neutrality' (Austin 1998, 39). This is because the practice of neutrality falls outside mainstream realist thought relating to the role of institutions. Realists follow a number of basic assumptions about international politics involving the centrality of the state and of state sovereignty, the importance of power, the political inducement of national interests, and the need for state survival. In times of conflict then, realists believe that states should balance or bandwagon following these assumptions, but neutrality sometimes provides a third option.

In appraising realism, this chapter outlines and assesses the realist perspective on small states and neutrality. Realism has an inherent bias towards the study of Great Powers (Elman 1985; Layne 1993; Mearsheimer 2001) meaning less attention is paid to small states and to their position and status in international politics. As small states are more vulnerable to external shocks and dangers, and are less threatening to Great Powers, realists are less interested in them. For some small states, permanent neutrality is adopted as a means of achieving some level of security from outside threats. The idea of neutrality goes back to ancient times, as *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides (Warner 1954; Crawley 2006) illustrates, but it is still practiced today by a number of small states including Austria, Ireland and Switzerland.

There are many ways to define small states (Amstrup 1976; Archer and Nugent 2002; Hey 2003; Maass 2009; Steinmetz and Wivel 2010; Archer and Bailes et al. 2014) and this means there is no scholarly agreement on what constitutes a 'small state'. This results in a variety of definitions of small states usually relating to quantifiable criteria such as geographic size, population size, economic outcomes, and military spending. However, other means of defining small states exist, including self-perception, analysis of behaviour in international relations or by a combination of factors. Importantly, smallness is a relative term in which some states can be said to be 'small' in relation to others. For example, Luxembourg is small compared to Belgium and Belgium is small compared to France, and so on. David Vital (1967) argued in favor of a two-fold means of defining small states, suggesting that those advanced, industrial states with populations of 10-15 million people or underdeveloped states with populations of 20-30 million people could be categorised as 'small states'. In Europe, most states are small, including the Benelux members, the Nordic states, the Baltic States, the island states of Europe, and others such as those in the Balkans.

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This chapter will review the contemporary status of neutrality through the lens of realism and the examples of small states. The chapter will first outline the Melian Dialogue from *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides (Warner 1954). The Melian Dialogue is a seminal piece of realist writing that has retained a resonance throughout history as it establishes many of the problems associated with neutrality. The chapter will then assess the realist position on neutrality including an outline of different types of neutrality and the four guiding principles that shape neutrality. This will be followed by a discussion concerning small neutral states during the Cold War. A number of states adopted neutrality during the Cold War for various reasons largely relating to geo-political circumstances. The contemporary position of neutrality in the post-Cold War period will be discussed which will show how unfashionable neutrality has become at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## The Melian Dialogue

*The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides (Warner 1954) was written around 431 BC and it is said to be 'the only acknowledged classic text in international relations' (Boucher 1998, 67). The book presents a detailed account of the ruinous war in ancient Greece between Athens and Sparta, a war that lasted for approximately 30 years from 431-404 BC. Parallels between the Peloponnesian War and the World Wars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century can be made because of the large scale destructive consequences of these wars. In ancient Greece, states were small city states but democratic Athens was using its maritime trade to prosper and grow which alarmed many other neighbouring city states. As Thucydides writes, 'the growth of the power of Athens and the alarm which this inspired...made war inevitable' (Crawley 2006, 24). The Peloponnesian League was created under the leadership of Sparta to curtail and counter this growth by Athens (and its allies). Kagan writes that 'the Peloponnesian War was a classic confrontation between a great land power and a great naval power' (Kagan 2009, 53). The Melian Dialogue retains its relevance in the modern world regarding the idea of neutrality for three reasons: it shows that neutrality is not a new concept and that it was recognised in the ancient world; it demonstrates that debates about war and neutrality have a timeless quality; and it also highlights that realists have always shown an interest in the institution of neutrality.

The narrative about the Peloponnesian War by Thucydides establishes the cause of the war, the political debates about the war, identifies key events and infers (many) lessons about international relations. In explaining the war, the narrative of Thucydides offers a pessimistic view of human nature and infers that structural factors in international politics play a role in warfare. Many realists reading *The History of the Peloponnesian War* interpret from this that international relations is essentially about *power politics* between sovereign states (Wight 1978, 24; Kagan 1996, 25; Boucher 1998, 68; Kolodziej 2005, 49). The text also establishes Thucydides as one of the, if not *the*, founding fathers of realism (Kolodziej 2005). Importantly, while the text is about the Peloponnesian War, there is thus much to be learned about international relations, war and strategy throughout the ages.

In the book, Thucydides explains the position of Melos, a small island that was formerly a Spartan colony in the Melian Dialogue. Melos adopted a position of neutrality when the war began 'and at first remained neutral and took no part in the struggle' (Crawley 2006, 336). However, Athenian generals calculated that Melos could become of strategic importance if it decided to join Sparta due to its location, and this perspective lead Athens to threaten Melos. Negotiations between the Melians and Athenians are carried out, and the Melians see occupation of Melos as a form of slavery. The Athenians argue: 'you would have the advantage of submitting before suffering the worst, and we should gain by not destroying you' (2006, 338). The Melians ask whether 'you would not consent to our being neutral' (2006, 338), but the Athenians reject this as they see acceptance of Melos as a neutral state as a strategic vulnerability. The two sides debate the situation, each with legitimate concerns. For Melos, neutrality means trying to stay out of the war, but for Athens the slightest possibility that Melos might align with Sparta is too alarming a prospect that cannot be ignored. As Kolodziej writes, 'the Melian wish for neutrality is now viewed as a threat to Athens's security' (2005, 63). From a realist perspective, this is not about 'right' and 'wrong' but is instead about national security on both sides. The Athenians send in their army and lay siege to Melos, and while there were a few skirmishes, the superior power and size of the Athenian forces leads to an Athenian victory. The Athenians are ruthless as '[they] put to death all the grown men whom they took, and sold the women and children for slaves, and subsequently sent out five hundred colonists and inhabited the place themselves' (Crawley 2006, 343).

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The Melian Dialogue exhibits many realist themes such as the security dilemma, the utility of military force, the transformative nature of warfare, and that national security is of prime concern to states (large and small). It also demonstrates that neutrality is a practice that goes back to ancient times but this is partly contingent upon the acceptance of 'larger' powers. Before the war, Melos was a trading nation that had good relations with Athens and thus its neutrality was accepted. However, the war with Sparta changed the political context making neutrality unacceptable to Athens. The small size of Melos coupled with its geographic location made it vulnerable to larger states such as Athens. The Athenian strategic logic is to eliminate a potential threat leading Thucydides to assert that 'The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must' (Warner 1954, 302). For many realists reading the Melian Dialogue, it is the logic of Athens as a 'great' power that is important, not the position of Melos. The inherent bias (or certainly interest) towards larger states (or 'Great Powers') is clearly demonstrated by Thucydides, though this is perhaps a natural outcome for many studying international politics. It also illustrates that neutrality is sometimes ignored, or indeed pushed aside, when the risks associated with war are interpreted by belligerents as overwhelming. Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff write that, 'to the realist, politics is not a function of ethical philosophy. Instead, political theory, is derived from political practice and historical experience' (1990, 83). With the Melian Dialogue, it is clear that the neutrality of Melos has become strategically inconvenient for Athens and so military might is used to eliminate a perceived vulnerability. This is about the practical realities of war and not about ethical considerations, and thus Melos is crushed. The 'might' over 'right' argument clearly prevailed in the case of little Melos.

### Neutrality and Realism

Neutrality is a much maligned and misunderstood concept. Yet, as Goetschel writes, 'neutrality used to be an eminent component of discussions on European security: for centuries it was *the* alternative to membership in military alliances and a safety belt in the case of collective security failures' (Goetschel 1999, 115). For realists, state sovereignty and the protection of state sovereignty is of the utmost importance and has to be guarded by all possible means, which means the acquisition of power becomes an important objective, and power equates to having military capabilities. But the adoption of neutrality places various limits on foreign policy options, including the adoption of policies and practices of impartiality towards belligerents during periods of international conflict (especially war) and not becoming involved in war except in instances of self-defence. For small states, though, neutrality is a means of (further) securing their sovereignty. Neutrality also means maintaining such positions during peacetime.

Neutrality provides a politico-legal framework for states to follow that involves a level of international co-operation, recognition and acceptance by the wider international community. The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 (Karsh 1988, 18; Goetschel 1999, 118-9) institutionalised the legal dynamics of neutrality setting legal bounds for neutral states to follow. This included the rights and duties of neutral states, the status of individuals from neutral states, how belligerents should act towards neutral states, and the regulation of war on the high seas. Many states from around the world were signatories to these conventions including Britain, Russia, Germany, USA, Brazil, Korea and Uruguay. A third set of conventions was planned for 1915 but the First World War broke out. For realists, such frameworks are an imposition on state sovereignty as they run counter to realist principles. States, according to realist thought, should be motivated by national interests (including national security) rather than by international practices (or institutions) like neutrality. For neo-realists, the anarchical nature of international politics is key to understanding the behaviour of states which should lead to states balancing or bandwagoning (Waltz, 1979). While realists acknowledge neutrality exists, they have some difficulty in explaining why it exists (Austin 1998, 39-41).

Neutrality is a contrivance of statecraft usually associated with small states. As realists are more concerned with larger states e.g. Great Powers and Superpowers, small states are of marginal interest unless they have a geo-strategic value or are an integral part of an international crisis or problem. As small states tend to have fewer military capabilities, they have to adopt policies and strategies designed to enhance their security as much as possible. In addition, geography can play an important role in determining whether a small state adopts neutrality. For a number of small states, such as Austria and Finland, their location in relation to others was a factor in becoming neutral (Hakovirta, 1983). Finland was a neighbour of the Soviet Union but a democratic, capitalist-based state, and so it was neutralised to appease the Soviets in 1948. Austria was occupied by the Allied powers after the Second World War for about ten years and became neutral in order to regain its sovereignty after occupation. Other states like

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Sweden, Switzerland and Liechtenstein were also part of this neutral bloc in the middle of Europe with Yugoslavia, in addition, becoming part of the non-aligned movement.

There are three types of neutrality plus the variant of non-alignment. Joenniemi writes that 'this wide-ranging elastic concept has been developed over several centuries, and its subjective meaning has been defined in large part by (in)security' (Joenniemi 1993, 289). *Ad hoc* or temporary neutrality is when states adopt neutrality when other states go to war. There are many examples of this throughout history, including Spanish neutrality during the Second World War or Iranian neutrality during the Gulf War of 1990-91. Realists recognise this form of neutrality as an expression of national interests and foreign policy. States that exercise neutrality on an *ad hoc* basis are not bound to adopt neutrality in future wars though they can do so. The second form of neutrality is *De Jure* neutrality or neutrality by international law. There are two forms of *de jure* neutrality: 'neutralisation' meaning an international agreement has been reached which determines the neutrality of a state; and 'permanent' neutrality in which the state has voluntarily become neutral. Cases of 'neutralisation' include Austria and Finland during the Cold War; the best example of 'permanent' neutrality is Switzerland which adopted neutrality in 1815 following the Napoleonic wars. *Neutralisation* means that an international agreement has been imposed upon the neutral state, though not necessarily against its will (even though this does seem somewhat contradictory). 'Permanent' (or traditional) neutrality partly relates to the voluntary nature of adopting neutrality but also to the strict adherence to non-alignment over a substantial period of time. The third form of neutrality is *de facto* neutrality in which neutrality has been adopted without recourse to international law. Ireland and Sweden are *de facto* neutral states and follow policies of neutrality without signing international treaties; yet their neutrality is broadly accepted by the international community. The Vatican City State (or Holy See) is also officially a *de facto* neutral state, largely for religious reasons.

A variant of neutrality is 'non-alignment' which is a diluted form of neutrality that emerged during the Cold War. A number of states sought to opt-out of the politics of the Cold War including India, Sweden and Yugoslavia; they formed the 'non-aligned' movement. In essence, the non-aligned movement involved states that adopted neutrality in terms of the Cold War. That is, these states did not want to align with the Americans or the Soviets during the Cold War period. India, as a non-aligned state, was involved in three wars with Pakistan during the Cold War period illustrating that it was not neutral. While the non-alignment movement still exists, it is a largely redundant organisation now. For the most part, states adopt various forms of neutrality contingent upon their own political objectives, geographic position, and security needs.

In adopting neutrality, states are following four principles (Karsh 1988; Goetschel 1999; Walzer 2000). These four guiding principles are non-participation in wars involving others, not starting any wars, defending neutrality, and abstaining from any policies or actions that might lead to war. These principles establish certain legal and political obligations for neutral states; *de facto* neutrals also follow these obligations. Adopting such obligations applies to *all neutral* states. When a war begins involving other states, those states declaring neutrality should adopt a position of impartiality equally to all belligerent states. In a reciprocal way, belligerents are forbidden to violate the territory of neutral states or attack neutral states (Karsh 1988, 23). The second Hague Conference of 1907 on neutrality sets out the legal position of neutrality for both neutral states and belligerents at a time of war. The second principle is that neutral states should not instigate wars; as most neutral states are small states with smaller military capabilities and greater vulnerabilities, it is highly unlikely that such states would instigate a war. The third principle is to 'defend neutrality' which involves a number of factors including having high levels of predictability and credibility in being neutral during times of peace, having some military capability in order to have some means of self-defence, and abstaining from any policies or actions that might lead to war (which is the fourth principle). Vukadinovic writes that 'armed neutrality is one of the classical requirements of neutrality...neutral countries have always been expected to use *all means* at their disposal to safeguard their independence' (Vukadinovic 1989, 39). Political impartiality, diplomatic networking, consistency in being neutral, and developing some defensive military capability all play a role in establishing and maintaining credibility in being neutral. As it is small states that adopt neutrality, military capabilities are primarily defensive in nature and sometimes involve forms of conscription as in the case of Switzerland. Showing credibility in being neutral is of fundamental importance. For example, when the United Nations was created in 1945, Switzerland refused to join on the basis that its credibility as a neutral state might be jeopardised; it was not until a referendum in 2002 that Switzerland joined.

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## Small States, Realism and the Cold War

The Cold War divided the world for over four decades in the second half of the twentieth century. The ideological contest between Soviet communism and Western liberal democracy created a global balance of power which aligned favourably with a realist analysis of international politics. Indeed, for realists, a balance of power configuration is an inevitable and conscious feature of international politics, and for neo-realists it is an outcome of the international system (Sheehan 2005, 19). According to realists, power is a determining factor in international behaviour and self-preservation is the highest duty of any state. Moreover, small states tend to adopt balancing behaviour that maintains the international status quo; small states are not in a position to be revisionist states. For small states, there are underlying political forces, including geography, that shape their political options and establish certain limitations and constraints. For states like Austria and Finland, their proximity to the Warsaw Pact made them vulnerable particularly in the early days of the Cold War. Becoming neutral as a means of both preserving their sovereignty by appeasing the Soviets was a logical and appropriate stratagem. With neighbouring Sweden (for Finland) and Switzerland (for Austria) both being neutral, this perhaps further enhanced their own neutrality by becoming part of a neutral bloc. The adoption of neutrality when the Cold War balance of power was emerging in Europe in the 1950s also meant these states contributed to a status quo throughout much of the Cold War by becoming a geo-political buffer between West and East. The Soviets were arguably in a position in the immediate post-war period in which they could have occupied both Austria and Finland, as they did with other states like Poland, but the adoption of neutrality satisfied Soviet concerns. For the Americans and West European states, the neutral bloc provided a buffer zone between East and West during the Cold War (Hakovirta 1983, 570). Furthermore, acceptance of neutral states by both Superpowers demonstrated a mutual restraint that contributed to the overall balance of power. For neo-realists, the structure of international politics allowed these states to become neutral during the duration of the Cold War; neutrality in this sense becomes less an aberration and is explained as an outcome of structural pressures.

While Austrian and Finnish neutrality became part of the Cold War balance of power in Europe, Irish neutrality had a different genesis. Ireland had gained independence in the 1920s partly after a period of violent turmoil against the British which accelerated during the First World War. Ireland adopted neutrality partly because of domestic political reasons (there was a brief civil war in Ireland following independence) but also as a sign of pacifism following years of political violence and civil war. This neutrality was maintained throughout the Cold War period though Ireland maintained good relations with the USA and it was able to join the Common Market (now European Union) in 1973. Ireland was part of the 'big five' neutral states of Europe alongside Austria, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland, and some of the lesser known neutrals like Andorra, Cyprus, Liechtenstein, and the Vatican City.

## Post-Cold War Neutrality

The Cold War provided a framework in which neutrality was a viable and sometimes useful diplomatic mechanism for maintaining the status quo. For example, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) was based in Vienna *because* of Austrian neutrality; and the UN has its European headquarters in Switzerland. However, neutrality became less relevant in the post-Cold War period. This is perhaps shown by Austrian, Finnish and Swedish membership of the European Union. During the Cold War, the EEC/EU was viewed by the Soviets as part of the Western Alliance in tandem with NATO (Tarschys 1971; Hakovirta 1983). In practical terms, this meant Austria, Finland and Sweden could not apply for membership fearing this would negate their neutrality; this applied to Swiss membership of the United Nations until 2002. With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, neutrality was a more-or-less redundant concept in Europe. Neutrality had 'lost most of its significance' (Goetschel 1999, 122).

The enlargement of the European Union in the post-Cold War period was mirrored by NATO. Since the end of the Cold War, NATO developed a number of new structures and programmes including the establishment of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the 'Partnership for Peace' programme. Such developments were partly designed as part of a new security architecture for Europe, and partly to legitimise NATO in the post-Cold War period. The five main neutral states in Europe have joined the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, which would not have been possible during the Cold War. For realists, this indicates that the so-called aberration of neutrality has been seriously undermined in the post-Cold War period to the point at which it is now an irrelevant concept. Goetschel writes: 'the

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neutrals quickly shifted to a policy aimed at becoming as 'normal' as possible' (1999, 115).

## Conclusions

During the Cold War period, neutrality was *sui generis* for a number of small states in Europe. As a political strategy it was designed to offer a form of insulation from the power politics of the Superpowers to protect the sovereignty of these small states. Neutrality set in play a number of constraints for these small states with the proviso that they would gain a greater sense of security. However, neutrality is contingent upon the acceptance of other states as shown by the case of Melos in ancient times, and by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, especially regarding Austria and Finland. For realists, neutral states can play a marginal role in the balance of power, but with the end of the Cold War there has been a lack of such a balance. Morgenthau writes, 'neutrality of the small European states is essentially a function of the balance of power' (Morgenthau 1939, 482). For small states, neutrality is motivated by national security concerns, but realists (and especially neo-realists) see neutrality as an outcome of the balance of power. Since the end of the Cold War, the world has seen a period of US hegemony (Layne, 1993) and neutrality has become less relevant. However, with the rise of China, the re-emergence of Russia and the economic emergence of others, like India and Brazil, a multi-polar balance of power is currently evolving. For realists and neo-realists, a global balance of power might mean a return to normal international politics, but it might also provide space for some small states to adopt neutrality.

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