International Politics, **2007**, **0**, (■ ■)
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www.palgrave-journals.com/ip

Realism and the Small State: Evidence from Kyrgyzstan

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Realists characterize the contemporary international system as a field of competing units of various sizes and capabilities, struggling by means of strategies of self-advancement to achieve goals that are sometimes common, sometimes contradictory. The nation-state is the fundamental unit in the realist constellation of actors. Large and resourceful states can achieve their goals through partnership, influence, alliance, demand, and coercion. Small and less resourceful states find the strategies at their disposal more constrained. Hence small states are encouraged by realist doctrine to pursue strategies of aggregation, coalition-formation, and integration. Thus, realist prescriptions for the small state encourage strategies that run counter to the realist explanation of international dynamics. Are realist policy prescriptions for the small state necessarily anti-realist? This paper addresses this question through an analysis of realist theory with respect to the foreign policy strategies of a small Central Asian state, Kyrgyzstan.

International Politics (2007) **0,** 000–000. doi:10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800218

Keywords: realism; small states; Kyrgyzstan; Central Asia

Introduction

For the realist the basic currency of international affairs is power. Power is not easily created in international affairs. It tends to be relational. States are not so much powerful because of the absolute capacities that they command, but rather by virtue of the way they relate to one another. Weapon sophistication, throw-weight, naval tonnage, and so on are measures not of power but capacity because their meaning is always essential relational. The more powerful state is not one with a specific measure of naval tonnage, but with a relative advantage. Power, like status, is a quality that can be shifted around primarily only through zero-sum adjustments. For one state to gain more power, usually, means that some other state or states must lose a corresponding amount of power. The exact measurement of power is often

Gml : Ver 6.0
Template: Ver 1.0

Journal: IP ☐ Disk used Despatch Date: 5/11/2007
Article : ppl_ip_8800218 Pages: 1 – 13 Op: KGU Ed: VIJI

problematic. States can rarely be confident of being able to judge their power with respect to one another, although the leaders of states often have general ideas of how states rank with one another in terms of scales of various dimensions of power, military, economic, moral, and so on. But in this ranking, small and limited states often find that they are relegated to a position in which they have virtually no power at all. Any time a ranking of powerful states is conducted, the process seems to tail off soon after the first entries. Those ranking toward the bottom, that is the so-called ‘small states,’ merely seem to be categorized as ‘not powerful.’

If the basic capital of the international community is power, what are the options that are open to states that are ‘not powerful’? Small states, that is, states that figure toward the bottom of any ranking of powerful states, frequently confront major challenges in development, equity, and quality of life. Any state that has limited resources, limited possibilities, and low scores on the standard human development indices may be characterized as a ‘small state.’ Small states tend to actually be small in terms of population and territory, but the concept of a small state refers to the influence — the power — of the state, not to the absolute size of the population, the economy, the territory, and so on. Small states have only limited influence in global governance and global public decision-making, although a large proportion of the world’s overall population lives in such small states.

Many of the explanations of poverty, inequity, injustice, exploitation, corruption, and other correlates of underdevelopment in the world’s small states suggest that the policies are badly chosen or badly carried out in these small states. In other words, it is often suggested that the small states are not powerful because they are poor. But there is another way to look at this problem. What if they are poor because they are not powerful? Realists believe that power is the currency of the international community. If this is true, then if small states were more powerful, they might be less poor. Moreover, if poor states are interested in becoming less poor they might do so most effectively by first becoming less powerless, that is, by seeking to gain power as the road to prosperity. What do realist theories prescribe for small states interested in becoming more powerful so that they might become less poor?

Most realist thinking is oriented toward the commanding heights in the struggle over power in the international community. Realists at great length have analyzed how large and resourceful states can achieve their goals through partnership, influence, alliance, demand, and coercion. Realists have spent much less effort on explaining what small and less resourceful states can do to achieve their goals. But because small states are not capable of shooting high, small states would seem to be urged to shoot low. Small states anxious to increase their power would be encouraged by realist doctrine to pursue strategies that would compound their limited influence. They would be encouraged to pursue policies of aggregation, coalition-formation, and integration. In other words, small states should not act like large states; they should act like states pursuing a different set of strategies for the enhancement of their own power. But this set of strategies invariably involves small states in relationships such as coalition-building, partnering, parliamentary formalism, integration, and other activities that realists believe to be secondary in the real struggle for influence. Realist prescriptions for the small state, therefore, seem to encourage strategies that run counter to the realist understanding of the nature of international dynamics. This poses a profound logical dilemma: Are realist policy prescriptions for the small state necessarily anti-realist? To answer this question, this paper summarizes the realist approach to the small state. Second, the paper analyzes the case of the small Central Asian country of Kyrgyzstan. The paper analyzes Kyrgyz foreign strategies in terms of influence. The paper concludes with an analysis of the realist policy advice for the small state.

Realism and the Small State

Realism has been the ‘gold standard’ theoretical construct in American scholarship on national interests, diplomacy, and international relations.[1] According to realism, states are principally motivated by calculation of strategies that bring ends into line with means in a world that is a self-help system of self-interested parties. It is a world in which states are continuously insecure, by the threat of avarice or violence arising from other states. Realism is the idea that the state of nature in international relations is highly competitive and not limited by reliable constraints imposed by a legitimate authority. Neither natural law nor any other legitimate secular single power acts to impose legitimate constraints if these acts run counter to the national interests of another state. Realism assumes that all states seek security for themselves but also seek other goals such as wealth, territory, or influence. These other goals may often challenge the security of other states. Because neither natural law nor a legitimate single power acts to constrain the acquisitive or expansive tendencies of other states, actors must seek to supply security for themselves. Realism rests on the idea of self-help. A system of relationships that is stabilized through self-help is often described as a system
Q1 of anarchy (Milner, 1991, 1997).

The anarchy described by realists is not chaos, or at least not necessarily chaos. It simply describes a state of nature. The state of nature may be so competitive and so unstructured as to dissolve into chaos but that is surely not the desired state of affairs. Realism is not a war-fighting manifesto; it is a war-avoiding doctrine. One of the first proponents of realist thought, the classical

Chinese theoretician of conflict, Sun Tzu, argued that there are self-evident principles of the goodness of moral and social order. Politics is the struggle to replace ignorance with the truth. War is sometimes an unavoidable element in that struggle. Sun Tzu sees battle in highly instrumental terms. For Sun Tzu there are principles of humanitarian law and the civilized relations among belligerents. Sun Tzu argues that all warfare is based upon deception. Sun Tzu's war-avoiding doctrines were repeated by the classical doctrine *si vis pacem para bellum* (if you seek peace, prepare for war).

The 19th-century German historian Leopold von Ranke characterized modern European historyas a continuous struggle for mastery and advantage. Von Ranke's emphasis on the competitive role of the state waslater adapted by Q2 the American realist tradition beginning with the work of Hans J. Morgenthau. *His Politics among Nations* established a paradigm for thought about foreign policy and diplomacy. Morgenthau argued that 'International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power'. Whenever [statesmen and peoples] strive to realize their goal by means of international politics, they do so by striving for power (Morgenthau, 27).

An extension of the Morgenthau tradition can be found in the work of the neo-realists. The theorist Kenneth Waltz argued that the structure of relations among states acts as a constraint on state behavior, such that while states are motivated by the same kinds of calculations, the states vary in their ability to Q3 achieve their goals (Waltz, 1959). Other neo-realists have asserted that international regimes and institutions come into being when national actors Q4 possessing sufficient power take the necessary steps to create them (Krasner; Gilpin).

Dominant thinking has focused on the role of leaders in the international system. Realists have emphasized 'power transitions,' the moments of great change in the distribution of power. The end of the Cold War was such a moment. John Ikenberry argued that the end of the Cold War was a 'big bang' reminiscent of earlier moments after major wars, such as the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the end of the World Wars in 1919 and 1945. The question dominating this treatment is what do states that win wars do with their newfound power and how do they use it to build order? In examining the postwar settlements in modern history, Ikenberry claimed that powerful countries did seek to build stable and cooperative relations, but the type of order that emerged hinges on their ability to make commitments and restrain power (Ikenberry, 2000). John Mearsheimer argued that as the Cold War came to an end many policy makers and academics anticipated a new era of peace and prosperity, an era in which democracy and open trade would herald the 'end of history.' According to Mearsheimer, great power politics are tragic because the anarchy of the international system requires states to seek dominance at one another's expense, dooming even peaceful nations to a relentless power struggle. Mearsheimer's idea of 'offensive realism' suggests that the modern great power struggle implies bleak prospects for peace in Europe and northeast Asia, arguing that US security competition with a rising China can be expected to intensify (Mearsheimer, 2003). The historical theorist Charles Kupchan employed realist theory in a different way, arguing that the challenge to the leading country, America, is emerging from a bloc of European countries that collectively will serve as counterweight to the United States (Kupchan, 2002). But the versions of realist thinkers, whether structural or historical in their orientation, explain their theory in terms of the big players in the international system. Small states and states that are insignificant in terms of throw-weight or economic clout are basically viewed as spectators in the international system.

What then do realists suggest as policy advice to small states? Small states, like all others, face the most definitive challenge of the realist world, the security dilemma. The security dilemma refers to a country's competitive search for assurance that its territorial integrity will not be compromised by neighbors. Many years ago the international relations theorist John Herz noted that countries existing in the anarchic state of the international community naturally want to increase their security from being attacked, subjugated, or annihilated by other countries. But, as these countries strive to maintain security from foreign threat, they are driven to acquire more and more power in order to escape the power of others. 'This, in turn,' Hertz noted, 'renders the others more insecure and compels them to prepare for the worst. Since none can ever feel entirely secure in such a world of competing units, power competition ensues, and the vicious circle of security and power accumulation is on' (Herz, 157). In this way, the legitimate goal of self-preservation — and obviously countries often have other more aggressive goals than this — inclines countries to policies that impel them toward conflict with their neighbors.

In international affairs the answer to the security dilemma for small states is usually a collective security institution (Osgood).[2] States functioning in the shadow of the power of the larger states are often seen in terms of strategies of partnerships, coalitions, and 'bandwagoning' (Powell, 1999). Collective security is most successful when a coalition forms against a common foe. 'Grand Coalitions' form to achieve common aims. When the common aim is the destruction of a foe, the coalitions exhibit great cohesiveness. But when the common aim is merely stability and maintenance of the *status quo*, these coalitions tend to become debating societies rather than security structures. Not all members benefit equally from the *status quo*. When grand coalitions achieve their ends — such as national independence against a colonial power — they soon turn into coalitions of everybody against almost nobody. Since there is no way for such a coalition to win anything, the coalition disintegrates as each member begins to seek to win something from some other member (Riker).[3]

Minor powers with alignments to great powers tend to be less conflict prone than alignments with countries of equivalent capabilities but missing a 'Great Power Patron' (Siverson and Tennefoss)[4]. As a general principle, this would suggest that in a post-independence situation an asymmetrical partnership between a large power and a closely linked secondary power might prove more stable than a grand coalition. In this way, the legitimate goal of self-preservation may incline countries to adopt policies that impel them toward conflict with their neighbors by partnering with regional powers or 'Great Power Patrons.'

How do the assumptions and explanations inherent in the theories of realism fit with the experience of small states? Analyzing one case in detail illustrates a way of assessing the general implications of the realist model. In the following discussion, we survey the case of the small Central Asian state of Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan: 15 Years of Independence

Kyrgyzstan came into existence as a separate state only in December 1991, as a result of the collapse and disintegration of the USSR (Haghayeghi, 1995; Hunter and Broxup, 1996; Kubicek, 1997). Kyrgyzstan never existed as an independent state in its present borders prior to the existence of the USSR. It is a mountainous country, occupied by the Tien Shan mountain range. Kyrgyzstan's rugged geography divides the country into a number of differing topographical areas. Kyrgyzstan includes agricultural valleys and lowlands, ravines and high mountain plateaus, and nearly inaccessible mountainous highlands. Kyrgyzstan's rugged ridges and ravines rise to the country's highest mountain, Jengish Chokusu (previously known in the Russian language as Pik Pobedy — Victory Peak), and reaches a height of 7,439 m (24,400 ft).

The livelihoods of the Kyrgyz people have historically been influenced by the country's geography. The low plains and stream-fed agricultural valleys were home to farming and animal husbandry. The higher valleys were home to nomadic animal husbandry and seasonal herding. The high peaks and remote areas were sparsely populated and were home to hardy generations of mountain people. In a certain respect, the physical features of the country divide it into northern and southern sections that are separated by extremely high mountains and few transportation routes. The physical separate of the north and south are reinforced by centuries-old ethnically based regionalism.

Roughly 50% of Kyrgyzstan's multinational population is ethnic Kyrgyz, 20% is ethnic Slavic (Russian, Ukrainian and other Slavic groups), 13% is Uzbek, about 2% is German, and other groups comprise the remaining 12%.

The Kyrgyz language is a Turkic language. It is a non-Indo-European language belonging to the Finno-Ugric group. Russian and Kyrgyz are the principal languages spoken today in Kyrgyzstan, but Uzbek, Tajik, and Uigur are also widely spoken outside the major towns. In practice, most government and commerce is conducted in the Russian language in the large cities. Many Kyrgyz government officials and professional and technical workers use Russian as their principal language. Most rural areas use Kyrgyz or one of the other indigenous languages of the region as their principal language.

Kyrgyzstan is a landlocked country with inadequate trade and transportation infrastructure. During the period of the USSR (1917–1991), Kyrgyzstan had a highly specialized economic niche in the communist economic system. Kyrgyzstan served primarily as a provider of primary commodities for industries located in the European parts of the USSR. In 1991, about 98% of the republic's trade was with other Soviet republics; over 40% of the republic's imports came from Russia (Anderson, 1999, 67). After the USSR collapsed, Kyrgyzstan's mining and industrial enterprises underwent rapid contraction due to the loss of orders from northern buyers and the inability of the existing transportation infrastructure to make possible a rapid entrance into other markets. Kyrgyzstan's military industrial enterprises soon lost their financing. Production at Kyrgyzstan's gold, mercury, and uranium mines fell sharply.

Nearly all Kyrgyzstan's manufacturing and much of the country's grain farming takes place in the northern foothills of the Tien Shan Mountains. The northern slopes of the mountains include the Chui and Talas Valleys as well as the country's largest city and capital, Bishkek. Further to the south and east, the high Naryn plateau is the home of traditional Kyrgyz animal husbandry, as well as dramatic Lake Issyk Kul, nestled high in the mountains. To the south, Kyrgyzstan's rivers run south and westward down into the Fergana Valley. The Fergana Valley is divided among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Fergana Valley is one of the world's most productive agricultural regions, bordered on three sides by high mountains and fed by the summer runoff from glaciers. The valley is home to some of the world's oldest successful irrigation systems. From Soviet times until the present, the Fergana Valley has been a major producer of cotton. It is also a major producer of mulberry leaves, the preferred food of silk worms, and a necessary step in the production of silk fabric. In the regions of the Fergana Valley belonging to Kyrgyzstan, the population is mixed among ethnic Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks as well as other groups. Competition over the possession of agricultural land and access to water is intense.

The Republic of Kyrgyzstan was an early leader in the post-communist transition. Kyrgyzstan's enthusiasm for the reform path earned the country the reputation as the 'democratic showcase of the former Soviet Union.' Soon after independence, the Kyrgyzstan government embraced the policy prescriptions of the ‘Washington consensus.’ The country’s pro-reform leader, Askar Akaev, a scientist and former president of the republic’s Academy of Sciences, quickly established an impressive record of encouraging political and economic liberalization. Kyrgyzstan attempted to implement the policy prescriptions of the Washington consensus in good faith. The Kyrgyz government liberalized most prices, established a national currency, began privatization and financial sector reform, and introduced the legal and regulatory framework for open trade with its neighbors. Non-tariff barriers were removed and export taxes were eliminated on all goods. In December 1998, the Kyrgyz Republic became the first former communist country to qualify for entrance to the World Trade Organization.

While Kyrgyzstan retained a ‘presidential’ form of government, Kyrgyzstan’s parliament grew relatively independent, often challenging presidential authority on key issues (Jones Luong, 2002; Jones Luong and Weinthal, 2002). Opposition political figures were often visibly subject to harassment and intimidation, but the very fact that this takes place so often is an indication that Kyrgyzstan’s political context is one of competing views and constituencies. Non-governmental civic organizations were relatively widespread and influential in public affairs. Heads of local administrations were elected in 2000 for the first time rather than appointed as they had been previously selected in Kyrgyzstan and as they continued to be selected in other Central Asian states. While Kyrgyzstan’s human rights record received criticism from international organizations, there was more open discussion and fewer instances of direct coercion and intimidation of human rights activists than in other Central Asian states.

But the economic and political reforms in Kyrgyzstan did not succeed in transforming the country into a showcase example of political and economic change. Kyrgyzstan followed IMF and World Bank prescriptions but did not evade heavy indebtedness. Kyrgyzstan underwent price liberalization and privatization, but did not solve the problems of poverty, unemployment, and monopolistic practices of the country’s most important mines and industries. Nor did the market reforms succeed in establishing a true competition policy that would lead to a level economic playing field and functioning market economy. Also, Kyrgyzstan was, in a relative sense, one of the most pro-reform-oriented countries of the post-Soviet transition, adopting many textbook democratic reform programs. But these democratic reforms did not overcome the deeply entrenched clanism and familialism in Kyrgyzstan that continues to undercut fairness and non-discrimination. Nor did Kyrgyzstan’s relatively democratic reforms produce greater political participation and political stability; critics aver that these factors instead culminated in the combination of a coup d’état and revolutionary overthrow of the government in March 2005.

Kyrgyz Foreign Policy: Parameters and Constraints

Given this description of the political development of independent Kyrgyzstan, what would realist theory prescribe in order for the country to pursue national security and economic prosperity? Realist policy would prescribe seeking to maximize national interest through employing self-reliant policies of security and encouraging the management of economic policy oriented toward national gain. Because Kyrgyzstan is not a country with the capacity of individually compelling other countries to conform to its interests, it would best pursue policies of negotiation and cooperation based upon coalitions and partnerships. Kyrgyzstan, given its position within Central Asia and its complex position amidst the Great Power conflicts in the context of broader Asian affairs, must be concerned about both security and economic considerations (Hopkirk, 1994; Dawisha and Parrott, 1997; Brzeziski, 1998; Blank, 2003; Bukkvoll, 2003; Cohen, 2003; Nichol, 2003). Kyrgyzstan did not initially pursue an energetic security policy. In the period immediately following independence, Kyrgyzstan was relatively unconcerned about security issues, leaving these questions to its more powerful neighbors, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Even when security issues reemerged with the onset of the Tajikistan war, Kyrgyzstan's commitment of peacekeeping troops in Tajikistan was merely symbolic and was soon withdrawn. But lying on the fault line between West and East, Kyrgyzstan soon became a focus of competition of many outside influences and competing ideologies (Abylkhozhin *et al.*, 1998; Allison and Jonson, 2001; Akimbekov, 2003; Allison, 2004). Insurgent and terrorist movements borne out of the brutalities of the Afghanistan war (1979–1989) and the Afghanistan insurrection under the Taliban (1994–1996) have spilled over to Central Asia. In 1999 Kyrgyzstan faced a major trial when Islamic Rebels from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan shattered Kyrgyzstan's sense of neutrality by taking four Japanese mining geologists working in the southern part of the country hostage. Later, the rebels captured several Kyrgyz villages. Among the terrorists are those who seek the overthrow of the governments of Central Asia and the establishment of an Islamic regime (Gleason, 2002). Also among them are those who seek to profit from the illicit cultivation and trade in opium and its deadly derivative, heroin. In the past five years, Afghanistan has emerged as the world's largest producer of opium. The southern border regions of Kyrgyzstan have increasingly been used as a transshipment point for illicit drugs to Russia and Western Europe from Southwest Asia.

Central Asian regional cooperation as a means to protect its interests failed (Spechler, 2002). The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) agreement proved inadequate (Sakwa and Webber, 1999; Gleason, 2001). The other regional agreements that Kyrgyzstan entered *into* between 1994 and 2005 existed merely on paper: the CIS Collective Security Treaty; the Central Asian Union; the Central Asian Cooperation Organization; and the Shanghai Forum all promised greater cooperation. But dwindling intra-regional Central Asian trade, the failure of international policy harmonization, and a growing concern with terrorism, threats of insurgency and organized crime gradually persuaded Kyrgyzstan to seek more simple and reliable arrangements by taking on a *Patron*. Kyrgyzstan played a leading role in coaxing Russia to return to exercising a 'special role' in Central Asia.

Russia's renewed influence in Central Asia has evolved in the context of the 'Eurasian Economic Community' or 'Eurasec.' Eurasec was first established in October 2000 as an outgrowth of the Central Asian Union, a group that was heavily supported from Kyrgyzstan since its origination in 1994. Eurasec emerged as a way to link Russia with the Central Asian states as well as some other former Soviet states. Eventually, Eurasec grew to be the core element of Russia's broad security strategy toward the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia. This was a surprising development, given the fact that the Central Asian Cooperation Organization was originally established primarily to reduce the influence of Russia in Central Asian affairs. But, given Kyrgyzstan's growing recognition that it could not secure and defend its own security interests, it increasingly sought to draw Russia back into a key role in the region.

Similarly, Kyrgyzstan sought military support from the US, offering the use of military facilities as logistical support for America's role in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. When the US was pushed out of base facilities in neighboring Uzbekistan in autumn 2005, Kyrgyzstan was quick to offer the US a replacement by expanding the Ganci Airbase near Kyrgyzstan's capital city of Bishkek. Kyrgyzstan's newly elected President, Kurmanbek Bakiev, following a meeting with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in October 2005, reaffirmed the continuation of a US military presence in Central Asia, announcing that US troops would stay in Kyrgyzstan 'as long as the situation in Afghanistan warranted it' (Saidazimova, 2005).

Conclusion: Is Realist Policy Advice for the Small State Self-Defeating?

The analysis of the case of Kyrgyzstan provides tentative conclusions with respect to both the applicability of realist policy recommendations and, in larger compass, the soundness of the realist model, itself the 'gold standard' of explanation in international affairs. The general validity of these conclusions depends upon much more thorough investigation of the realist model to small states utilizing a large *N* study with more systematically identified parameters for rigorous theory testing. However, the preliminary conclusions based upon this case study suggest that realist theorists should take more seriously criticism of the theory so frequently heard in underdeveloped countries. The criticism that the realist model in its simple form explains only the calculations and dynamics of a few privileged and powerful states — the Great Powers — while ignoring the dynamics of the great bulk of the states in the international system deprives the model of any serious pretension of being a 'scientific explanation' of the dynamics of international affairs. Considerations of security and economic development may be the abiding concerns of small states, but the calculations that these states use to promote their national interests are scarcely.

Notes

1 Reviews of the Realism, Liberalism, Neo-Realism, and Neo-liberalism arguments can be found in Michael Doyle (1997). Also see Michael J. Smith (1986) and Colin Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman (2003).

2 According to the traditional definition, a collective security agreement obligates members to abstain from recourse to violence against one another and to participate collectively in suppressing the unlawful use of force against any member. See Robert E. Osgood (1968,17). Q8

3 This argument is developed by William Riker as the theory of 'minimum winning coalitions.' See William Riker . Q9

4 Randolph Siverson and Michael Tennefoss, in their study of 256 interstate conflicts between 1815 and 1965 analyzing the effect of great power/minor power alignments on propensity to engage in conflict, found that 'for minor powers, a major power ally was…able to provide the augmentation of national strength necessary to achieve deterrence' (Randolph M. Siverson and Michael R. Tennefoss, 1984, 1062).

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