Small States in Great Power Competition: Where Does Kosovo Stand?

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Kosovo's position as a small state in the context of intensifying great power competition. In today's international system, global dynamics are increasingly shaped by strategic rivalries and shifts in the international order, where small states often have limited influence and are subject to external pressures. The study uses qualitative methods and a theoretical framework based on balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging to examine foreign policy behavior. Empirically, it focuses on Kosovo's relations with key global actors, particularly the United States, Russia, and China. The findings show Kosovo's consistent alignment with Western alliances, especially in security policy, while the lack of recognition from Russia and China continues to constrain its international consolidation and participation in international organizations. A SWOT analysis highlights strengths such as strong Western support and security cooperation, as well as weaknesses including limited diplomatic capacity and partial recognition. Overall, the prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration remain open but are increasingly shaped by global rivalries and regional dynamics.

Keywords: *Kosovo; small states; great power competition; foreign policy*

1. Introduction

When Thucydides wrote that "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they must accept," he was not merely describing an ancient episode of conflict, but formulating a logic that has shaped international relations for centuries. In a global order where power often determines the rules of the game,

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small states appear destined to operate in the shadows, accepting realities imposed by powerful actors. However, as Collins (2007) highlights, security can no longer be understood solely through traditional military perspectives. At times, what initially appears to be a serious obstacle may also present a new opportunity. This reflects that the interaction between an actor and its environment is so complex that there is no clear boundary between obstacles and opportunities (Hill, 2003). Although in theory it seems apparent, in practice it is more complicated, because the international context itself is as fluid as it is unfair. In this regard, every state, large or small, must develop policies capable of adapting to unforeseen circumstances. In this context, despite the limitations imposed on them by size, resources, or security, small states may not be merely objects of geopolitical competition, but can also become capable and strategic actors with the ability to influence outcomes. But what happens to small states in a world that continues to follow this logic? Are they simply passengers in a system shaped by the interests of the powerful, or can they find ways to act wisely? In this sense, Kosovo, despite being a relatively new and small state, represents a particularly important case for the study of small states within the broader international environment. As a partially recognized state, its position in the international system is shaped not only by internal state-building processes, but also by external geopolitical dynamics (Hoxhaj, 2016). In addition, this means that Kosovo's foreign policy is also strongly oriented toward Western alliances, particularly the United States and Euro-Atlantic structures, while non-recognition from influential actors such as Russia and China remains a major obstacle to Kosovo's efforts to strengthen its international position.

2. Theoretical Framework: Small States in Great Power Competition

Based on the premise that small states are not merely passive actors in the international system, but respond strategically to the balance of power and emerging threats. In an anarchic environment, where no central authority guarantees security, states are compelled to adopt strategies that ensure their survival and stability. Traditionally, small states are defined not only by their limited material capabilities, such as military strength, economic size, and population, but also by their limited ability to influence the international system (Handel, 1981). Given this context, small states are required to develop strategies that safeguard their security within a system dominated by great powers. In the literature, three main strategies are usually highlighted: balancing, bandwagoning, and hedging. According to balancing theory, states form alliances or increase their capabilities in order to counter the

power of a stronger state, thereby maintaining stability and preventing hegemony. Discussions of the balance of power suggest that states seek to reduce security threats by attempting to influence the distribution of power through alliances and domestic policy choices. When states are unable or unwilling to balance, they tend to align with or support stronger powers (Chong, 2003). In contrast to balancing, bandwagoning refers to aligning with the stronger actor. This may be undertaken for defensive reasons, as a means of preserving independence in the face of a potential threat, or historically, in some cases, to gain territory. Since both balancing and bandwagoning are best understood as responses to perceived threats, it is important to consider the factors shaping possible threat, including aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions (Brown, Lynn-Jones & Miller, 1995). This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of Kosovo, as the country does not have the luxury of pursuing an independent great power policy. As a young and small state, it faces ongoing security challenges, especially from Serbia and broader regional tensions. By aligning closely with the United States and NATO, Kosovo secures military and political protection, thereby reducing the risk of external threats. Another important strategy for small states is hedging. Understanding hedging behaviour is key to explaining how small states operate under conditions of uncertainty. In international relations, a state engages in hedging when it seeks a middle ground, particularly in uncertain environments. Hedging involves maintaining flexible relations with multiple powers, avoiding full alignment while attempting to maximise benefits from competing actors. Rather than directly confronting major powers, weaker states cautiously strengthen their position for the future. Consequently, they adopt a strategy known as "strategic hedging", avoiding conflict in the present while preparing for potential future risks and changes (Tessman & Wolfe, 2011). This strategy has become particularly important in the context of the growing rivalry between the United States and China, where many small states, including Kosovo, seek to balance their security ties with economic opportunities.

3. Kosovo in Great Power Competition

How can a foreign policy be constructed when the existence of a state as an international subject is called into question? For most newly established states, diplomacy begins with clearly defined borders, functioning state institutions, and internationally recognized sovereignty (Gruda, 2009). However, for peoples still in search of statehood, diplomacy becomes a struggle for existence itself, an effort to build bridges with the world while simultaneously convincing that same world of

their legitimacy as political actors. The case of Kosovo represents a particularly distinctive and meaningful example of this challenge. For decades, Kosovo was unable to represent itself in international relations; instead, its diplomatic fate was determined by larger structures, such as the Yugoslav Federation and later the United Nations international administration (Malcolm, 2001). Nevertheless, even under such constrained conditions, the foundations of a political and diplomatic consciousness began to emerge, one that would later be channeled into aspirations for statehood, culminating in the declaration of independence on 17 February 2008 (Hoxhaj, 2016). Despite this achievement, Kosovo remains a small state operating within a "great game" largely shaped by major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia. In this global competition, Kosovo is not an actor that defines the rules of the game, rather, it is significantly influenced by the actions of others. In practice, Kosovo is closely aligned with the United States and the Western bloc. However, this alignment is not merely a matter of choice but also one of necessity. It stems from the crucial support provided by the United States and NATO, without which both its security and even its existence as a state would be far more uncertain and vulnerable (Hoxhaj, 2022). For this reason, Kosovo tends to align its positions and policies with those of the United States, even on broader global issues such as relations with Russia and China. On the other hand, Russia consistently opposes Kosovo's independence and supports Serbia, while China maintains a similar stance based on its principle of non-interference and concerns over potential precedents that could encourage separatist movements within its own territory (Rexhepi, 2025). Consequently, this geopolitical reality leaves Kosovo with limited strategic alternatives, effectively placing it, whether by choice or necessity, within the Western camp. It can therefore be argued that Kosovo has little room to pursue a strategy of balancing "between two chairs". Instead, it is clearly positioned alongside the West, as this alignment provides it with support, security, and prospects for development and integration.

3.1. Alignment with the United States

In the past century, no other country has shaped international relations as decisively and at the same time as ambiguously as the United States of America. What is new about the emerging global order is that, for the first time, the United States can neither withdraw from the world nor fully dominate it. For Kosovo, since the very beginning, starting with the declaration of independence and continuing thereafter, the United States and the European Union have been its key global partners, even though Europe's global influence has been declining more rapidly than previously expected (Hoxhaj, 2016). The United States stands as Kosovo's principal global

partner due to its decisive support for Kosovo's freedom and independence, as well as the values it represents as the world's leading superpower. This alignment is deeply rooted in historical experience. The role of the United States in supporting NATO's intervention in 1999, along with its continued backing of Kosovo's independence in 2008, created a strong foundation of trust and political dependence (Bajrami, 2025). For many people in Kosovo, the United States is not just an ally but also a guarantor of security and statehood. As a result, Kosovo's foreign policy is often shaped in ways that reflect U.S. strategic priorities. In addition, the presence of NATO forces (such as Camp Bondsteel) and the continued political support from Washington serve as key pillars of Kosovo's security architecture. Politically, alignment with the United States also strengthens Kosovo's international legitimacy. Given that Kosovo is not universally recognized, U.S. diplomatic support plays a crucial role in expanding its recognition and facilitating its participation in international organizations. This makes the relationship not only strategic but also existential in terms of state consolidation (Hoxhaj, 2022). However, this close alignment also limits Kosovo's strategic autonomy. Unlike larger states that can engage in balancing strategies among competing powers such as the United States, China, and Russia, Kosovo has limited room to maneuver. Therefore, its foreign policy remains consistently oriented toward the Western bloc, often reflecting U.S. positions on major global issues, including sanctions, democratic governance, and security policies.

3.2. The Role of Russia

Unlike the United States, which has been the main supporter of Kosovo's independence and state-building, Russia has positioned itself as its strongest opponent in the international arena. Russia's role is not so much related to direct territorial interests in Kosovo, but rather to the use of its case as an instrument in the broader geopolitical confrontation with the West. Two key moments illustrate this approach. First, its opposition to NATO's intervention in 1999 in the UN Security Council, despite the documented crimes of the Serbian regime. Second, the 2007 blockage through the threat of veto against any resolution that would pave the way for Kosovo's independence, thereby preventing its membership in the United Nations and its full international consolidation (Hoxhaj, 2022). In Russian discourse, Kosovo's independence is presented as a violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity, an argument that Moscow has used selectively to justify its actions in Georgia and Ukraine (Ingimundarson, 2022). Thus, Kosovo is transformed into a politically instrumentalized precedent, rather than a unique case (sui generis), as argued by the West. Within the framework of global rivalry between the United

States, Russia, and increasingly China, Russia uses the Kosovo issue to challenge the liberal international order and to preserve its influence in the Western Balkans through support for Serbia (Hoxhaj, 2022). Through this strategy, Moscow seeks to hinder Euro-Atlantic expansion and to maintain unresolved conflicts as tools of geopolitical pressure. In this way, Kosovo becomes part of the international "great game", where Russia does not seek direct control over the territory, but uses its status as a means to challenge the West and to strengthen its position in the transforming global order.

3.3. The Growing Influence of China

In the context of increasing rivalry among great powers and the transformation of the international order, China is emerging as an increasingly important global actor, primarily through its economic power and strategies of international expansion. Through instruments such as strategic investments, trade, and infrastructure initiatives, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative, China has managed to significantly expand its presence in various regions of the world (Mitić, 2022). In the literature, this rise is considered a new phase in international relations, in which China is becoming a major political and economic actor on a global scale (Proroković, 2025). However, China's influence in the Western Balkans remains selective and concentrated, mainly in a few states, particularly Serbia, which is regarded as its key strategic partner in the region (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020). Although Chinese investments are increasing, they remain significantly lower compared to those of the European Union, indicating that China's economic influence, while expanding, is not dominant (Jovanović, 2025). Within this framework, Kosovo's position is specific. Due to China's non-recognition of its independence and the support Beijing provides to Serbia in international forums, Kosovo–China relations are highly limited. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, China has the capacity to block Kosovo's efforts to join international organizations, further complicating its full international consolidation and legitimacy (Hoxhaj, 2022). This stance is also linked to China's internal concerns regarding the precedent of self-determination and the risk of encouraging separatist movements. Consequently, China's influence on Kosovo remains largely indirect and limited, mediated through its presence in the region and particularly through its close relations with Serbia (Mitić, 2022). Within the framework of global competition among the United States, Russia, and China, the latter does not treat Kosovo as a direct priority, but nonetheless contributes to shaping the geopolitical environment in which Kosovo operates, while simultaneously challenging the Western-led international order.

4. SWOT Analysis of Kosovo's Position in Great Power Competition

Table 1. SWOT Table of Kosovo's International Position

Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)	Opportunities (O)	Threats (T)
Strong strategic partnership with the United States	Partial international recognition	Euro-Atlantic integration (EU and NATO integration path)	Strategic rivalry between United States and China
Security guaranteed through NATO presence (KFOR)	Dependence on external security guarantees	Strengthening international recognition through diplomacy	Russian opposition in United Nations Security Council
Alignment with Euro-Atlantic institutions (EU integration perspective)	Limited diplomatic capacity and global reach	Expansion of bilateral recognitions	Non-recognition by Serbia
High international legitimacy from 1999 intervention context	Exclusion from United Nations membership	Participation in regional cooperation frameworks	Geopolitical instability in Western Balkans

Source: Author's compilation

The SWOT analysis shows that Kosovo's position in the international system is largely shaped by power imbalances and a strong reliance on external actors. One of the country's main strengths lies in its close cooperation with the United States and Western institutions, particularly NATO, which provide crucial support in both security and political terms. From the very beginning, this backing has been essential for Kosovo's survival as a state and for the gradual strengthening of its international legitimacy. At the same time, these advantages come with important structural limitations. A key challenge remains the lack of full international recognition, especially by major global powers such as Russia and China. This non-recognition directly limits Kosovo's ability to join the United Nations and reduces its role in major global decision-making processes. Despite these constraints, there are clear opportunities for progress, because Euro-Atlantic integration continues to be a long-term priority, with membership in the European Union and deeper cooperation with NATO seen as vital for enhancing security and strengthening the country's international standing. Ongoing diplomatic efforts to secure additional recognitions also represent an important pathway toward consolidating statehood. However, the external environment presents serious risks. Growing rivalry between the United States, Russia, and China has increased global uncertainty, which can indirectly affect smaller states like Kosovo. In addition, Russia's opposition in the United Nations Security Council, together with Serbia's continued refusal to recognise Kosovo, remains a major obstacle to full international integration and contributes to ongoing regional tensions. Overall, the SWOT analysis confirms that Kosovo

operates within a constrained and complex environment where external actors play a decisive role. Alignment with Western partners provides stability and protection, but long-term success will depend on expanding diplomatic recognition and gradually reducing reliance on external support.

5. Conclusions

From the analysis, it is evident that Kosovo, as a small state, operates within an international system characterised by power asymmetry, which significantly limits its scope for independent action. In this context, small states are not merely passive actors but adapt through various strategies such as alignment, balancing, and hedging. In the case of Kosovo, alignment with the United States and the Euro-Atlantic structures, particularly NATO, clearly dominates as a strategic choice driven both by security needs and by the pursuit of full international legitimacy. This orientation has provided stability and important support for the state of Kosovo, but at the same time it has also created dependence on external guarantees, thereby limiting its autonomy in foreign policy. Furthermore, the lack of full international recognition remains the main obstacle to the consolidation of statehood, particularly due to the positions of Russia and China within the UN Security Council. This makes integration into international organisations more difficult and increases vulnerability to external pressures. In this context, Kosovo is indirectly affected by the rivalry among major powers, particularly between the United States, Russia, and China. While American support remains the primary guarantee of security and stability, Russian opposition and China's growing presence in the region contribute to a more complex geopolitical environment. Overall, Kosovo represents a state with clear advantages such as its Western orientation and international support, but also structural weaknesses related to partial recognition and dependence on external actors. Nevertheless, opportunities for Euro-Atlantic integration remain significant and constitute its main strategic direction. In conclusion, the case of Kosovo demonstrates that small states, although operating under constrained conditions, are not passive actors. Instead, they actively adapt within the structures of the international system in order to pursue their interests and strengthen their international position.

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