The United States, China, Russia, and other large nations are the world's great military powers, acting as the dominant players in their regions and beyond. However, smaller nations make a range of significant contributions, particularly in their work with multilateral institutions and military missions. Gerrard Cowan investigates

The term 'small nation' is a difficult one to define. The Forum of Small States, an unofficial grouping of UN countries, classes a small state as having fewer than 10 million people. This still covers a large number of countries – most of the nations in the world, in fact. As such, the definition covers a range of states with hugely varying military capacities and interests, from Iceland to Israel.

However, there are some things that they have in common. Perhaps most obviously, most simply cannot exert the same degree of military influence in isolation as their larger neighbours. Many are therefore naturally attracted to institutions like NATO, said Dr Jamie Shea, deputy assistant secretary general for emerging security challenges in the alliance.

NATO's Article V collective defence mechanism is immensely important to the alliance's smaller nations, promising as it does to invoke the military support of France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other larger alliance members in the event of them being subjected to an attack. This is important to all members, although it is especially true of the three Baltic States, given their geographical position.

However, the attraction of the alliance runs deeper than this, according to Shea. For countries like Slovenia or new member Montenegro, NATO membership represents a seal of approval from the Western family of nations.

"It's a seat at the table," Shea told Jane's. "In a world that's always geopolitically been dominated by the big players or big alliances or big blocs, the smaller countries have often lost out; they've been the victims of history."

Joining an organisation like NATO helps them step out of this undesired role, he pointed out. "NATO and the EU allow these countries to escape that historical predicament of being consigned to one country's sphere of influence or being the playthings of territorial adjustments or geopolitical rivalries of the great powers," said Shea. "They feel as if they can exist as sovereign states in their own right."

In an organisation like NATO decisions are taken by consensus. While the power of a larger member state will always matter, a smaller state "still has the same voting rights and the same veto right as a big one", Shea added. "This gives them a kind of influence and leverage. They have the ability to be heard, to be listened to, and to be players, in a way that didn't exist in the 19th century."
There are a number of concrete ways that nations benefit from their NATO membership, ranging beyond Article V. For example, Shea pointed to the sharing of intelligence and the recent establishment of the Joint Intelligence and Security Division (JISD).

“This aims to collect and share much more intelligence among allies, both civil and military,” Shea explained. “If you’re a small country and you don’t have a large intelligence service yourself, the idea is that you can plug into this and suddenly develop massively more awareness of what is going on, say if you’re worried about jihadists crossing your territory or carrying out attacks on your territory.”

This represents a large return on investment for the smaller countries, he said. They naturally have relatively small gross domestic product (GDP) levels, meaning the absolute amount of money that they contribute to NATO budgets is far smaller than their larger counterparts, “but they’re able to use this circuit of influence and information sharing,” said Shea, adding, “I think that for the smaller countries in particular, something like NATO is really very good value indeed.”

Plug and play

This rotational concept is gaining importance and is referred to as ‘plug and play’. It is particularly relevant for smaller nations, given the naturally limited resources they possess. A similar approach is taken with the NATO Response Force, Shea noted, with countries providing certain capabilities in specific timeslots, “so they can plan in advance to know that in two years time they’re going to be called upon for one year in a certain task force, for example”.

NATO also works closely with a range of smaller nations that are not members of the alliance. Ireland is a good example, Shea said, because the country is a leading authority on counter-improvised explosive device (IED) techniques. Ireland works with NATO nations to build their capacity in the area, as well as with the UN and other bodies.

“It’s a good example of a country that is neutral, but can still offer NATO a first-class facility,” Shea said. “They got into counter-IEDs earlier than NATO, which really only got into it in 2003,” when the alliance took the leadership of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Ireland has a long history of involvement in UN peacekeeping and has contributed to its counter-IED expertise. It has had a decades-long association with the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), with about 380 troops posted there as of the end of June, according to UN statistics. The country supplies the head of mission and force commander: Major General Michael Beary. Ireland is also involved in a number of other missions, notably the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in the Golan Heights between Israel and Syria (although many UNDOF outposts have had to be abandoned as a consequence of the Syrian civil war).
UN peacekeeping is about more than military capabilities, said Ciaran Murphy, assistant secretary general and defence policy director at the Irish Department of Defence; it is also a state of mind. Ireland does not bring “any colonial baggage”, he said. While it is driven by interests like any other state, “we don’t necessarily bring national strategic interests to the fore”, he added. “We bring unique capabilities in the area of peacekeeping, which I think is highly recognised by other countries.”

Murphy pointed to a memorandum of understanding with the United Kingdom, which was agreed in early 2015.

“One of the areas of interest and training is in the area of UN peacekeeping … it’s a different skillset than what one might bring to a combat operation,” he noted. “On top of that, I think we also have unique capabilities arising from our history in the area of counter-IED, bomb disposal, EOD [explosive ordnance disposal], and those sort of skills,” Murphy added.
Ireland has developed a strong reputation in counter-IED work. Above, Lieutenant Jane O’Neill, team leader of the 48th Infantry Group's Engineer Specialist Search Team, pictured in the Golan Heights as part of the UNDOF operation. (Irish Defence Forces)

Membership of international organisations gives smaller countries like Ireland a voice, Murphy said, which they can use in association and co-ordination with others who have similar perspectives.

“The multilateral order and the rules-based approach to international relations, I think, is extremely important for smaller states because it provides a framework within which they can exert influence, within which their voice can be heard,” he told Jane’s. “And therefore I think it’s really important that we continue to operate the multilateral system and that we continue to respect it.”

[Continued in full version…]

The EDA

Murphy also highlighted the European Defence Agency (EDA), which he said was beneficial for smaller countries that do not have the same capacity as larger states to develop new capabilities or work with new technologies. He pointed to the organisation’s Maritime Surveillance (MARSUR) project as an example.

“The EDA, to some extent, has acted as a framework within which Ireland has been able to advance its interests and its capacity in the area of, say, maritime security with the MARSUR project,” he said. “That will continue to be an important part of our engagement with the European Defence Agency going forward.”

The EDA provides its members with an à la carte approach, said Martin Konertz, the organisation’s capability, armament, and technology director.
“Each state can choose to collaborate in our projects according to its national interests. Estonia, for example, is interested in promoting cyber defence in the EU context and can do so through the agency. The task of the EDA is to encourage as many of the states as possible to join collaborative projects, so that their forces are not being developed in isolation and are able to coherently work together,” Konertz explained.

Konertz also noted that smaller nations often do not have the large planning and procurement infrastructures that larger nations possess.

“We can provide an overview of the military capability landscape from a European perspective. We can provide the bigger picture, which can help them take informed decisions on capability development,” he said. In addition, the EDA is developing courses of action for member states on collaborative ways to develop and deliver those capabilities, Konertz added.

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Serbian troops preparing for a patrol in Lebanon as part of UNIFIL. (Serbian MoD)

Multinational missions

A number of smaller countries have significantly increased their contributions to international operations over the years. For example, the Serbian Armed Forces currently have 332 personnel deployed on multinational missions: a large increase over previous years. The bulk of these – 177 troops – are with UNIFIL, while 75 are with the United Nations Multinational Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) and the remainder are spread across various regions, including Cyprus and Mali.
In a previous interview with Jane’s, Commander Jovan Krivokapic, a spokesperson for the Serbian Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence (MoD), said that participating in such operations was an important part of Serbia’s defence policy.

“A UN checkpoint in Cyprus manned by Serbian troops. (Serbian MoD)"

"By participating in peacekeeping operations, Serbia fulfils its international obligations stemming from membership of the United Nations and other international organisations,” he said. “The participation of our soldiers in the UN and the EU-led peacekeeping operations has been constantly increasing from year to year."

There is no other international organisation that offers as many international deployment opportunities to such a broad range of smaller nations as the UN thanks to the sheer breadth of its membership. Adam Smith, team leader in the strategic force generation and capability planning cell in the UN’s department of peacekeeping operations, told Jane’s that “just because a nation has a population of below 10 million, it doesn't mean they can't contribute like any other nation”, pointing to Fiji and Uruguay as examples.

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Smaller nations provide the UN with a range of valuable resources, he said, noting that European countries in particular tend to provide a disproportionate number of staff officers and military observers, who are “generally well-trained and exceptional officers”. This is an important consideration for the UN, Smith said, and is at least as important as demands around equipment.

“I think we talk a lot about things like helicopters and special forces and other needs, but we have just as big of a need for well-trained and qualified military observers and staff officers who are..."
running our force headquarters," he explained, “so we very much value the contribution of smaller nations who can send us really well-trained and experienced staff officers.”

Smaller nations have also developed innovative ways of sharing and rotating assets to maximise the efficiency of their contributions, much like NATO’s ‘plug and play’ concept. Smith pointed to Norway’s collaboration with other countries in the MINUSMA mission in Mali, under which the country partnered with Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, and Sweden to ensure a C-130 aircraft was always deployed on the mission over a certain timeframe.

"Norway decided to run the camp, which that was based in, to facilitate bilateral agreements with all those other European countries so that they can operate together as a multinational unit cycling in and out of the mission, which provided us with predictability of that important asset for over a two-year period," Smith said.

The arrangement is likely to be extended for another two years, Smith added, while the UN is looking at ways in which the approach could be applied with regard to other assets.

“One of the things we’ve been trying to do, in Mali, for instance, because the small countries can’t give us open-ended commitments of large units, is plan out shorter periods of time where they can contribute,” he explained.

The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) recently published a paper on the concept, entitled ‘Plug and Play: Multinational Rotation Contributions (MRCs) for UN Peacekeeping Operations’, which was written by Arthur Boutellis, director of the Brian Urquhart Center for Peace
Operations at the International Peace Institute (IPI), and John Karlsrud, senior research fellow and manager of the training for peace programme at NUPI.

In the paper the authors state that the MRC model has so far been mainly championed at the UN by small European states. These countries are used to operating in close co-operation across different aspects of their militaries, according to the report.

“Since the end of the Cold War European national armies have undergone deep and structural change and modernisation,” the report states, with forces reduced in size and focused on developing high-end, resource-demanding capabilities, in both financial and capacity terms. “The modernisation process, in conjunction with greater co-operation within the NATO and the EU frameworks, has made these forces interoperable, technically and culturally. They have adopted similar doctrines and standards, as well as an expeditionary mindset, after long deployments to Afghanistan and other out-of-area operations.”

From a political perspective, the use of MRCs can enhance and make visible burden-sharing and military co-operation, the report states.

“For UN peacekeeping, this means that, while European countries may have capabilities that could be of great benefit to the UN, these capabilities are few and far between and are difficult to sustain over time,” the report states. “In this sense MRCs may be mutually advantageous, covering many of the needs of both the UN and European member states.”

The report also considers the possibility of non-European TCCs taking the MRC approach. It points to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which has mounted regional peace operations and may see an interest in contributing helicopters as part of a regional MRC, among a number of other examples.

It also points to a number of other rotational contributions, involving either TCC-provided or UN-procured equipment, which go beyond the C-130 model. For example, regarding medical facilities “one lead-nation TCC might provide the capability, install the infrastructure and equipment, running it initially during a first rotation, and then handing over the full infrastructure and equipment to partner TCCs, which would only need to bring in appropriately qualified personnel”. Still, the report points out that reimbursement issues and incentives would probably need to be reviewed to make such arrangements viable.

The rationale behind MRCs from a Norwegian perspective is that the country’s priorities are changing towards a heightened focus on national defence and NATO contributions, said Paal Krokeide, a senior adviser in the Norwegian MoD.

“We’ve been looking for small footprint, high-impact contributions, which contribute to the reform of UN peacekeeping,” Krokeide said. “We’ve come to realise that we can’t compete in terms of quantity, so what we need to do is deliver quality.”

Small countries like Norway face certain structural challenges, which force them to be innovative, said Runar Kvamme, specialist director for operations at the Department of Security Policy in the Norwegian MoD.
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