

The RMA Theory and Small States

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The current Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) theory has been the focus of academics and military analysts, trying to define the role of technology in transforming military affairs during the past three decades. However, despite the vast literature on the subject, only a limited number of studies look into the implications of RMA on small states. The emphasis on great powers, as some scholars suggest, is a reflection of the fact that the broader strategic studies literature does not necessarily consider small states, as their capabilities significantly limited compared to their great power counterparts. In this context, the article argues that the relevance of the current RMA theory is dependent on the strategy employed by small states. For the purposes of this article, a small state is defined as a state that has “limited capacity to influence the security interests of, or directly threaten, a great power and defend itself against an attack by an equally motivated great power.” The article is divided into three parts. The first part discusses the characteristics of the current RMA. The second part surveys the strategies that small states in employ to survive in the international system. The third part assesses the current RMA theory’s relevance to the strategies of small states.

Key words: Revolution in Military Affairs, small states, foreign policy, limited military capabilities, strategic options, geostrategic predicaments

The current Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) theory has been the focus of academics and military analysts, trying to define the role of technology in transforming military affairs during the past three decades. However, despite the vast literature analyzing this theory, there are very few studies that focus on the implications of RMA on small states. The emphasis on

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great powers is a reflection of the fact that the broader strategic studies literature does not necessarily consider the situation of small states, as they have much more limited capabilities than their great power counterparts.¹ Eliot Cohen admits that the “failure to look at the response to RMA-type capabilities on the part of weaker opponents” may have been a mistake.² In their influential article on “complex interdependence,” Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye placed much significance on the concept of information revolution, arguing that it will “reduce the power of large states and enhance the power of small states and non-state actors.”³ While Keohane and Nye made an important point, they were not able to sufficiently explain how small states are affected by the information revolution. Given this gap in the literature, how is the current RMA theory relevant to the strategies of small states?

This article argues that the relevance of the current RMA theory is dependent on the foreign policy employed by small states.⁴ A small state, for the purposes of this article, is defined as a state that has “limited capacity to influence the security interests of, or directly threaten a great power and defend itself against an attack by an equally motivated great power.”⁵ The remainder of this article is composed of four sections. The first section discusses the characteristics of the current RMA. The second section defines the central research question in the context of the debates regarding RMA. The third section reviews the survival strategies employed by small states. The fourth section assesses the relevance of the current RMA theory on the strategies of selected small states.

The Revolution in Military Affairs

The RMA theory is based on the idea that substantial changes in any number of variables of war will generate changes in the entire military structure as well as its operations.⁶ Proponents of the theory have provided numerous definitions; however this article accepts the definition of RMA proposed by Andrew Krepinevich: “the application of new technologies into a significant number of military systems... in a way that fundamentally alters the character and conduct of conflict.”⁷ Several RMAs have transpired during the course of history. A prominent example was the revolution during the Napoleonic Wars during which the French military developed and implemented dramatic technological and organizational changes (standardization and mass production of weapons, and *levée en masse*,

respectively) that allowed France to forcefully dominate most of Europe for more than a decade.⁸

Another case was the naval revolution that involved the British and French navies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where wooden ships powered by the wind gave way to metal-hulled ships that used turbine engines. The advances in naval technology were also accompanied by doctrinal shifts that addressed the new capabilities of metal-hulled ships including more accurate weapons, greater speed, more durable armor, and additional space for supplies.⁹ In previous RMAs, it is evident that the main drivers were different variables of war: organization, technology, and doctrine. To understand the current RMA, it is necessary to review its characteristics and determine the variables leading the transformation.

According to proponents of the theory, the current RMA is predominantly technical in nature and was first manifested during the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. The key innovation behind this RMA is information processing, which is manifested in three elements: information dominance, precision weaponry, and joint-service operations. Information dominance integrates information capabilities, systems and resources to ensure command and control, battleground awareness and limit the enemy's "freedom of maneuver and action."¹⁰ These capabilities are expected to mitigate the "fog" and "friction" of warfare, allowing military units to operate more effectively across different domains.

"Advanced precision targeting" involves the use of guided munitions to destroy specific targets. The pin-pointed nature of these strikes allows the military to dominate the battlefield while minimizing the number of casualties during an attack.¹¹ The doctrine of joint operations enabled by information technology is the third element of the current RMA. Joint operations are coordinated through networking, which facilitates an organizational awareness of the battleground and rapid delivery of services accessible by all units anytime. Through information technology, joint operations are globally integrated, creating a critical advantage over adversaries.¹² While powerful states are realizing the advantages inherent in the current RMA, most small states are left with the challenge of constantly upgrading their military force structures, capabilities, and doctrines just to maintain modest defense capabilities.¹³

Literature on RMA and Small States

The current RMA evolved from a unique set of geopolitical circumstances, and is designed to address specific strategic conditions. The technologies that underpin this current RMA were originally intended to provide technological solutions to the problem of a hypothetical conventional military encounter between great powers during the Cold War.¹⁴ Despite the emphasis on great powers, scholars have offered several accounts of the relevance of the current RMA for small states.

The first explanation considers RMA as a way for small states to develop a deterrent against more powerful states. In the case of Singapore, Tim Huxley has argued that Singapore's defense posture has traditionally been based on the need to deter against threats posed by much larger neighbors such as Malaysia and Indonesia. Consequently, Singapore's leaders have emphasized the significance of exploiting technology to compensate for the lack of strategic depth and military power.¹⁵ Similarly, James Mulvenon maintains that Taiwan's motivation to implement an RMA has been driven by the threat of military force from its dominant neighbor, the People's Republic of China. Aside from this threat, Mulvenon points out that Taiwan's efforts to develop an RMA-enabled military force has been influenced by the US-Taiwan military relationship, which has increased in scope and depth since 1997.¹⁶ This explanation, however, is flawed because both authors failed to emphasize that the RMA efforts of both Singapore and Taiwan would only be useful if developed with more powerful allies such as the US.

The second explanation argues that engaging in an RMA is relevant to developing a forward-active defense capability. Referring to South Korea, Michael Raska argues that this state needs to have advanced military capabilities to absorb the momentum of a North Korean invasion by "trading territory for time, regrouping, and engaging in counterattack in superior strength with large-scale reinforcements from the continental United States."¹⁷ While Raska's explanation is valid, the unique geostrategic circumstances of the case study limit its representativeness.

A third explanation can be derived from the case of Israel during the 1980s. In *The Culture of Military Innovation*, Dima Adamsky explains that to counterbalance Israel's difficulty to wage a prolonged military campaign, preventive offensive was seen by military leaders as a better strategy. Adamsky explains that advanced military technology was central to Israel's

strategy: “They demanded a sophistication of the iron fists of the IDF that would bring the offensive deep into the enemy rear. They did not ignore new technologies; they saw in them promising force and protection multipliers against enemy countermeasures.”¹⁸ This argument is valid, but again lacks the ability to generalize to other states. Israel’s case is unique because it does not fit the criteria of a small state since its military capabilities are superior to those of most if not all of its neighboring states.

A fourth explanation involves the relevance of RMA for Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). David Betz argues that the RMA is relevant to MOOTW because the different types of operations involved, including peace enforcement, counter-narcotics, humanitarian assistance, and freedom of navigation also require advanced military capabilities to achieve operational success.¹⁹ Betz’s argument is compelling given that small states engage in more MOOTW compared to large-scale and force-on-force combat situations. A counterargument, however, is that not all small states have the capabilities and resources to acquire military technology for MOOTW. For instance, narcotics pose a significant threat to South American countries. However, small states in the region do not have the resources to obtain technological capabilities required to effectively eliminate the drug cartels. Another example is the South China Sea where small states are dependent on the US for the enforcement of freedom of movement because they do not have the means to obtain advanced maritime capabilities to defend their respective territories.

This article maintains that the relevance of RMA theory is dependent on the foreign policy employed by small states. Considering that small states implement a range of strategies, the four explanations presented by other scholars are insufficient. Before directly evaluating the relevance of the RMA theory, it is first necessary to review the existing strategies that small states employ for survival in the international system.

Strategies of Small States

Implementing an appropriate strategy is absolutely critical to the survival of small states. Since it cannot shape its environment through force, a small state must rely on a range of strategies suited to its capabilities and characteristics. In terms of military power, small states have limited capabilities for self-help. Therefore, they cannot maintain defensive operations against external threats. They are highly dependent on external

sources for weapons, and mobilize a high proportion of their military strength during conflicts, which effectively decreases their ability to engage in large-scale conflicts.

In terms of international politics, small states have a limited scope of interest and have minimal influence, if at all, on the balance of power in the international arena. Moreover, small states are depicted by some researchers as reactive in terms of foreign policy, risk averse and highly supportive of international law, norms and organizations.²⁰ Given these characteristics, there are four broad categories of strategies that small states employ for survival in the international system: international organizations, self-reliance, alliance building, and hedging.

International Organizations

International organizations were initially established to address the imbalance between great powers and small states by placing negotiations and disputes between states within the framework of international institutions. Despite the understanding that cooperation is advantageous to all states, literature on the subject indicates that small states tend to be more supportive of international institutions because of their inability to act independently.²¹ More importantly, as Robert Rothstein points out, international organizations are essential to the strategy of small states due to: the promise of formal equality; the collective security provided by the organizations; and, the potential capacity of the organizations to restrain great powers.²²

Self-Reliance

The limitations created by lack of resources, political influence, and military power do not prevent small states from challenging great powers based on measures of self-reliance. Diplomacy is a classic example of a self-reliance strategy; small states use diplomatic means to secure their national interests and appeal to world opinion, particularly in situations where they face violence and conflict. Diplomacy, combined with a modest military capability, will also allow small states to resist the demands of great powers. In her study of the behavior of small states during World War II, Annette Baker Fox argues that small states are capable of resisting great powers using different means including “economic, ideological, diplomatic and military measures.”²³

Neutrality is another example of a self-reliance strategy. The adoption of this strategy is premised on the assumption that the state chooses to depend solely on its internal resources without seeking any potential allies. Nevertheless, neutrality is a product of European diplomacy and has not been proven effective outside the region. The strategy's effectiveness is dependent on the credibility of the state, and permanent neutrality cannot be achieved if states are situated in a sensitive geostrategic location.²⁴

Alliance Building

Developing alliances is a key strategy for small states. States form alliances for two essential reasons: to prevent more powerful states from dominating a particular region or continent and as protection from an external threat. These circumstances limit states to two options - *balancing* or *bandwagoning*. Balancing refers to joining alliances to protect themselves from states or coalitions whose greater resources could become a threat.²⁵ A good example of balancing was the case of Cold War where several small states in Europe joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to protect their national interests from the Soviet Union.

Bandwagoning, on the other hand, refers to facing an external threat by building an alliance with the most threatening power.²⁶ An example of bandwagoning was the behavior of Cuba during the Cold War. Since Cuba was considered a significant threat to the US, the latter constantly oppressed the former through different methods, pushing Cuba to develop an initially weak alliance with the Soviet Union during the early 1960s, which was later consolidated through Cuba's show of support in the Soviet's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.²⁷

Hedging

The literature on the strategy of hedging has not been as extensive as the other strategies discussed above. Hedging, as defined by Malaysian international relations researcher Kuik Cheng-Chwee, is "a behavior in which a country seeks to offset risks by pursuing multiple policy options that are intended to produce mutually counteracting effects, under high-uncertainties and high-stakes."²⁸ Due to Chinese dominance in the Asia-Pacific region, several small states have chosen to adopt a hedging strategy to avoid specific alliances with other regional powers. Although there are numerous debates regarding hedging's general elements, one of the proponents of the

strategy, Evelyn Goh, suggests that the hedging behavior in Southeast Asia is based on the following measures: soft balancing, complex engagement with China, and involving a number of regional powers.²⁹

Relevance of RMA

Following a review of small state strategies, the next section will evaluate the implications of RMA theory using four examples. The states were selected based on their geostrategic predicaments and dominant foreign policy strategy: Albania's dependence on international organizations, Switzerland's strategy of neutrality, the Philippines' dependence on alliances, and Singapore's strategy of hedging.³⁰

Albania

Previous altercations with great powers have largely influenced Albania's foreign policy. It was conquered by Italy from 1939 to 1944; it allied with the Soviet Union from 1944 to 1961; and finally, it developed an alliance with China from 1961 to 1978.³¹ Albania's dependence on an external protectorate continues to influence its foreign policy, with its heavy reliance on the US, NATO and potentially the European Union. The Government of Albania highlights three main priorities in its foreign policy: integration with NATO, increased engagements with the EU and other international organizations, and enhancing its bilateral ties with the US.³²

Albania was one of the first states in Europe to signal their intention to join NATO after the fall of communism in the region in 1991. However, NATO initially rejected Albania's application because member states believed that it could not provide an acceptable contribution to their security. After more than a decade, Albania was invited to begin accession deliberations with NATO in 2007 and was finally accepted as a full member in 2008.³³

The cooperation between NATO and Albania covers a wide range of aspects such as security, defense and security reform, civil emergency planning, and public diplomacy. Among these areas, only security cooperation, defense and security reform would involve advances in military technology, which is the core of the RMA theory. Albania benefits from NATO's sophisticated military equipment and training, as it deploys military personnel in conflict zones as part of the International Security Assistance Force.³⁴ Furthermore, RMA is also relevant to the wide-ranging institutional reforms that were undertaken by the Government of Albania in

line with the requirements of obtaining NATO membership. Since Albania's objective is establishing interoperability with NATO, it had implement improvements in military communications systems, surveillance systems, maritime units, and logistics.³⁵

Multilateral engagement through other international organizations is another core strategy employed by Albania. Based on this strategy, Albania plans to increase its level of participation in organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and Organization for Security Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), but its main focus is seeking membership and eventual integration into the European Union. RMA would not be relevant in this particular case since the development of advanced weapon systems and drastic improvement of member states' military capabilities is not the goal of the European Union. Although the OSCE works closely with Albania, its mission areas are focused on non-military activities, specifically promotion of democratization and the rule of law, and human rights.³⁶

The government of Albania considers its relationship with the US "a special priority and of strategic and paramount importance for the country."³⁷ In this regard, Albania has consistently supported the Anti-Terror Coalition formed by the US in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks through providing intelligence regarding terrorist organizations in the region. The US has reciprocated the support by providing an average of \$20 million for defense training and equipment to the Albanian Armed Forces (AAP) facilitating their adherence to NATO requirements.³⁸ Similar to Albania's engagement with NATO, the relevance of RMA is central to its alliance with the US because of the importance of interoperability between both military forces.

Since Albania's strategy predominantly depends on international organizations and alliances, the RMA theory is certainly relevant considering that AAP will constantly have to coordinate and operate with the most advanced militaries in the world.

Switzerland

The objective of the Swiss foreign policy is "to safeguard the independence, security, and prosperity of the country."³⁹ This policy is based on three principles: rule of law (international law), good relations with all countries in the world (universality), and non-participation in international conflicts involving other states (neutrality).⁴⁰ Due to these principles, the Swiss

defense priorities do not include warfare, as they mainly focus on conflict prevention, collective security, and peace-supporting operations.

The Swiss identify conflict prevention as a top priority. While the strategy involves limited military operations, it requires diplomatic and communication measures more than the use of advanced weapons and information systems. Indeed, information technology can assist in providing early warning, situational awareness and increased mission success but it cannot account for negotiations, assessments and political judgments, which are necessary for conflict prevention.⁴¹ Therefore, the relevance of RMA is limited in the area of conflict prevention.

Collective security is another main priority in Swiss strategy. The literature suggests that RMA is relevant for some collective security arrangements, particularly NATO. RMA provided the basis for NATO's Defense Capabilities Initiative addressing the organization's insufficient technological capabilities, doctrines, and organizational structure.⁴² Moreover, these advancements significantly enhanced small states' defense capabilities within NATO; capabilities that some of these states could not have developed independently. However, Switzerland is a member of the OSCE and not NATO. Even though RMA can be relevant to the activities of OSCE, the theory will not have the same implications because the objectives and priorities of the organization are different from NATO. Therefore, the relevance of RMA is again limited due to its inability to account for the different strategies employed to face similar threats.

Similar to collective security, the literature on RMA acknowledges that the advantages it provides are applicable even for peace support operations. Elinor Sloan maintains that technological advancements presented by RMA are effective for peace support operations.⁴³ More specifically, she explains that precision-guided munitions, for example, are useful for peace operations because they can minimize collateral damage and, ultimately, casualties. Furthermore, reliable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, which are central to warfare, are necessary to determine the condition and movement of refugees in order to implement effective operations.⁴⁴ RMA is relevant to the NATO peace support operations but is not necessarily relevant to other military alliances such as the OSCE because its capabilities are different. Consequently, the relevance of RMA is limited and has not been proven relevant to the peace support operations of the OSCE in which Switzerland participates.

Overall, the relevance of the RMA to the Swiss strategy is limited because it is not inclined to develop a lethal and offensive military force. Instead, Swiss military forces are focused on conflict prevention, collective security, and peace support operations that are considered non-traditional military missions.

Philippines

Philippine foreign policy is anchored in the principles of international law, peace, equality, and justice. Its objective is to pursue an independent foreign policy through the “preservation and enhancement of national security, promotion and attainment of economic security, protection of the rights and promotion of the welfare and interest of its citizens overseas.”⁴⁵ But, since the capabilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) are still underdeveloped, the government has prioritized the following strategies: regional cooperation and cooperative security arrangements.⁴⁶

Bilateral and multilateral engagements with neighboring states in Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in general are critical to the Philippine strategy, mainly, because of its limited resources and military capabilities. While ASEAN is not a military alliance and does not maintain any military force, the Philippines gains benefits from its diplomatic (dialogue and negotiations) and political (influence in the UN) functions. In this context, the relevance of RMA would be limited to developments in the next few decades since most of the states in the region do have the resources to drastically transform their military capabilities.

The 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the US is still its most extensive cooperative defense arrangement. Despite complications in the security relations of both countries during the past two decades, the alliance was revitalized after the 9/11 terrorist attacks with the development of large-scale military training exercises in the country. In order to develop the interoperability between military forces, the US provided military equipment and carried out joint training programs focused on counter-insurgency, counterterrorism, intelligence training, and civic-military operations.⁴⁷

The improvement in AFP’s organizational and operational capabilities further progressed with the restoration of the Philippine Defense Reform Program and the Capability Upgrade Program, supported by the Bush Administration. Presently, with an increasingly aggressive China, the US-

Philippine alliance, under the Obama Administration, has shifted focus from counter-insurgency and counterterrorism to strengthening the AFP maritime security capabilities.⁴⁸ While this shift would not be considered a path towards dramatic military transformation in the Philippines, RMA is highly relevant to the effectiveness of US-Philippine alliance, which is one of the core strategies for the country's survival.

Given the circumstances, RMA would be beneficial for the AFP because of its dependence on US military assistance. The initiative towards improving the capabilities of the AFP is essential to ensure forces' interoperability and to strengthen the alliance. Although the Philippines also engages the support of its neighbors in Southeast Asia, these states and even ASEAN do not have the military capability to properly protect the Philippines from external threats.

Singapore

The development of Singapore's foreign policy is based on three main objectives: survival, national security, and economic well-being.⁴⁹ Due to its vulnerabilities and with China's aggressive posture in Southeast Asia, Singapore's foreign policy-makers have employed a hedging strategy that consists of a range of economic, political, and military approaches for preserving its sovereignty and national security.⁵⁰

Singapore's economic achievements are well documented. It had an estimated GDP per capita of \$51,709 in 2012, making it one of the richest countries in the world.⁵¹ The Government of Singapore has exploited this economic advantage by actively promoting bilateral trade with the Chinese Government. Even during the absence of official diplomatic relations, during the 1960s through the early 1980s, Singapore was already initiating bilateral economic cooperation with China. Aside from trade, bilateral economic imperatives have manifested in terms of investments and management skills transfer, as evidenced by the completion of the Suzhou Industrial Park Project in 1994.⁵² This strategy had allowed Singapore to become one of China's largest trading partners in Southeast Asia, making it more attractive compared to other states in the region. In this aspect of Singapore's strategy, the RMA theory has no relevance because economic relations between China and Singapore do not involve the exchange of any type of military weapons and defense systems.

In terms of diplomacy, Singapore's hedging strategy has concentrated on engaging both China and the US by using institutions such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as a mechanism to bind both powers in ensuring the status quo in terms of freedom of navigation at sea, a cohesive ASEAN, and a stable distribution of power in the region. As discussed previously, the relevance of RMA in the multilateral engagements between Singapore and other states in Southeast Asia is limited because multilateral institutions in the region are mechanisms for employing soft balancing or actions that do not directly challenge a great power through military means but through nonmilitary instruments in order to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral behavior.⁵³

The Singapore Armed Force (SAF) is a critical component of Singapore's hedging strategy because it acts as a deterrent in case there is a need to use force against threats in the region. The SAF is the most capable military force in Southeast Asia and has accepted the notion of an RMA through transformation of its platforms (Endurance Class Landing Ship Tanks) and capabilities (stealth and unmanned technology), doctrines (from COIN to high-intensity operations) and organizational structure (integrated knowledge-based command and control) over the past two decades.⁵⁴ More significantly, due to its economic success, Singapore has been able to afford a wide range of advanced military weapons and is currently one of the largest importers of major conventional weapons in the world.⁵⁵

The influence of the RMA theory on Singapore's strategy is extensive because RMA became an impetus for the Singapore Government to start the transformation of all aspects of the SAF. While hedging involves non-military approaches to maneuver around great powers, a credible military industrial complex is certainly a strategic advantage for a small state, considering the constraints and challenges it faces in the international system.

Conclusion

The RMA theory is generally relevant to small states engaged in protecting their sovereignty and advancing national interests; however, very few of these states can actually afford to transform their military forces. Therefore, to gain the benefits of revolutionary technology, they develop different strategies to adapt to the rapidly changing international system. In examining the different strategies, this article argued that the RMA theory has limited relevance in cases where a state employs a strategy of

neutrality (Switzerland) because such states are not inclined to develop a lethal and offensive military force. RMA theory, is of significance to small states that are highly dependent on international organizations (Albania) and alliances (Philippines) for their survival. Lastly, the RMA theory is relevant to small states engaging in a hedging strategy (Singapore) because they require a credible military capability in case all of the non-military policy options have been exhausted.

Notes

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