Balázs Mártonffy

THE MELIAN DILEMMA, AS SEEN FROM THE BANKS OF THE DANUBE

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, it is clear for all to see that the United States has found a systemic challenger in China. Many also assume that China's aim is to rewrite the rules of the world order established by the United States according to its own interests. But whether it wants to create a completely new set of rules and a new system at global level or only to reform the current one, are still open questions. Nor is it a foregone conclusion whether it will succeed or whether the United States will remain the primary great power in the international system. The purpose of this book is to assess Hungary's room for manoeuvre in the great power competition that is emerging and has already emerged in our time, and this chapter seeks to place this phenomenon in a theoretical and historical framework by addressing issues related to state and national security and the logic of power.

Different historical periods have different logics of power rivalry. According to some writers, the post-Cold War period, i.e. the post-bipolar period, was the most ideal for lesser powers, when they could best increase their room for manoeuvre.[1] But today we are beyond the post-bipolar era, and the rise of China has ushered in a new global era. So in this era of great power rivalry, it is not yet clear exactly what the fate of the lesser powers will be, and how much room for manoeuvre they will have. At the same time, a number of factors are beginning to emerge, the correct assessment of which is crucial in determining Hungary's room for manoeuvre.

The system is shaped by the rivalry between the two most dominant powers in the world, the United States and China, and the current global

[1] Szalai 2020: 57–77.

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environment is unreliable and unstable.[2] We are in a period of a so-called potential great power transition. In such cases, the lesser powers are usually only marginal players in the global context of the two powers' attention to each other. In fact, historical examples show that the aim of great powers is to prevent lesser powers from asserting their interests. This is particularly true in a period of great power competition. But even then, there is room for manoeuvre for lesser powers, and research clearly shows that even states much smaller than Hungary can achieve significant goals by choosing the right strategy.[3] Hungary must find the limits of its room for manoeuvre in this dynamic.

In order to define and assess the extension of the Hungarian room for manoeuvre, three dilemmas need to be correctly identified and their answers optimised. The first dilemma is to define Hungary's power identity, in other words whether it is a small or a middle power, as the two definitions dictate different foreign policy logics. The second dilemma is an alliance security dilemma: Hungary needs to find the right answers to the fear of abandonment in the alliance and to the fear of entrapment. And the third is perhaps the biggest question of our time, the dilemma of whether our current era is special – whether it is qualitatively different, either because of the presence of nuclear weapons, or because globalisation has restructured our world, or because the United States is a hegemon different from the previous hegemons. In order to understand the three dilemmas, it is essential to have a historical background and a theoretical framework for interpretation.

THE ANCIENT MELIAN DILEMMA FROM A MODERN PERSPECTIVE

To interpret the dilemmas, we have chosen an extended realist framework, in other words we draw conclusions based on a realist[4] foundation, while

2 Brady–Thorhallsson 2021: 1–11.

3 Braveboy-Wagner 2010: 407–427.

4 To be more precise, we start from a theoretical framework called structural or neorealist in international relations theory.

keeping the limits of the theory in mind. The title of the chapter evokes the historical past by following the lines of the oldest so-called realist writing, Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War.* This writing, which "can nonetheless be a rich source of inspiration for contemporary realist political theory",[5] contains the foundations of realism in political science and international relations theory. In realist theory, great powers that dominate a geographically defined region are called hegemons. In the regional great power competition of the 5th century BC, Sparta was the so-called 'status quo hegemon' ruling the system at the time. Sparta found a challenger in an emerging power, Athens. Athens was therefore the so-called revisionist hegemon, that is, the one who wanted to break the status quo, and its intentions grew with its power. According to Thucydides, it was Sparta's fear of the rise of Athens as the new hegemon that made war inevitable. It should be stressed here that it was not the fact of rise per se, but the *fear* of it, which, according to the ancient Greek writer, made conflict inevitable.

The rivalry between Sparta and Athens escalated into open warfare and spread to the whole region, and most city-states in the region have joined one or the other of the two alliances led by the two great powers. Melos, an island in the Aegean Sea and one of the region's minor powers, was still an independent state at the start of the rivalry. But it was different from other regional city-states in that it actually wanted to remain independent. But Athens did not allow this, and, according to the Athenian interpretation, could not allow it. The lines from the famous Melian dialogue below illustrate the logic of the opposing parties:

> "Melians: So [that] you would not consent to our being neutral, friends instead of enemies, but allies of neither side?
>
> Athenians: No; for your hostility cannot so much hurt us as your friendship will be an argument to our subjects of our weakness and your enmity of our power."[6]

[5] Illés 2015: 111–131.

[6] Thucydides 1910.

The stubborn resistance of Melos and its absolute insistence on maintaining its complete independence infuriated Athens, which eventually conquered it. Its men were put to the sword and its women enslaved by the Athenian great power. Melos wrongly defined its own power identity, the role of alliances and the importance of systemic criteria, and thus failed in its attempts to guarantee its own security.

The driving forces behind this historic example are still resonating today. If the parallel is to be applied to today's great power competition, the United States embodies the status quo hegemon, Sparta. China is its challenger, the revisionist hegemon, just like Athens was. The logic of the rivalry between the two hegemons and the return to the world of spheres of interest is part of our everyday life.

Taking the historical example further, Melos, which did not try to survive the great power rivalry of its time as a great power, could have been Hungary. After all, in today's Hungarian political dialogue we often hear the importance of independent and sovereign politics emphasised. However, Hungary's situation differs from that of Melos in at least one important respect. At the time of the above-quoted dialogue, Melos was not yet allied with either Sparta or Athens, but Hungary has been a member of the U.S.-led transatlantic alliance, NATO since 1999. These starting points provide the building blocks of our theoretical framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to correctly interpret the dilemmas affecting Hungary's room for manoeuvre and to understand the drivers of the international world order, the differences between states and powers need to be put into a theoretical framework. In political science and international relations theories, the social reality colloquially referred to as 'the world' is defined as the so-called 'international system'. And in the international system, it is the states that are the actors and it is their behaviour that is decisive.[7] Their actions and the

[7] Waltz 1979.

stability of the international system are determined, in a realist interpretation, by how much power each state has and how many great powers are present at any given time. Power is a complex concept that is difficult to define, and in the political science context it is usually understood as the ability of an actor to force another actor to do something that the actor would not do on its own. And states have different powers, which are difficult to measure in general terms.[8] Therefore, we have long thought of state power with an intermediate measure: the combination of military power and latent military power – i.e. economic power – was used as a compass for estimating the power of a state. Nowadays, more complex measures of power have emerged, which complicate the measurement of state power with several factors, including 'soft power', but the combination of military capabilities and economic resources available to a state is a commonly used starting point for classifying the power of a state.

States are nowadays categorised into three types: great powers (in their extreme form, superpowers), middle powers and small powers (in their extreme form, micropowers). But this has not always been the case, since international relations theory originally distinguished between only two types of power: great powers and lesser powers, meaning everyone else. However, this analytical framework, which included these two categories, was not sufficiently detailed or even relevant for powers that were not interested in the system as a whole, i.e. powers that did not have global ambitions.

The regional approach has become increasingly important in modern history. For example, the research of Kenneth Waltz, one of the most prominent figures of realism, carried out in the 1960s, showed that a bipolar world, a world with two great powers capable of forming two poles, was stable. According to Waltz, the stability of the relationship between the two superpowers during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States was therefore the decisive factor. And in his view, the Vietnam War was only a small, uninteresting blip in the system, as it did not threaten the stability of the system. What is more, in Waltz's

[8] Morrow 1993: 207–233.

view this war actually benefited the system, because it provided a limited battleground for the great powers.

At the same time, it is difficult to simply ignore a war that has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives over almost twenty years. For powers with no global ambitions, the role of regions and a regional approach are therefore also relevant, alongside global stability. Because if we think regionally – and almost all states other than the superpowers operate in regions – a war like the Vietnam War does reduce stability. As a result of these processes, the concept of the 'regional' great power was introduced to the analytical framework, which often meant only a middle power at the global level.

However, as it became clear that the regional approach was at least as important as the system itself when considering the foreign policy room for manoeuvre of individual countries, it was no longer enough to think in terms of 'great powers' and 'everyone else'. This is why the concepts of middle and small power have been developed, which are often used differently by scholars and experts, depending on whether they are thinking in a regional or world/systemic framework. For example, a power can be a full systemic middle power (like Germany today), but if we look at the European Union alone, it is already one of the great powers, together with France.

These concepts of power are often mixed due to the different contexts of territory and time. It is important to note, however, that there is not and never has been an exact dividing line as to when a state becomes a 'great power' or when exactly a state turns into a great power from a small power. Moreover, since power sometimes tries to see itself as stronger or weaker out of a hidden agenda, there will never be a clear dividing line. A scientific definition may reflect the views of the majority of researchers, but consensus on this issue is illusory.[9]

At this point, in the early 2020s, there are different pictures of the situation of the great powers. If we accept the combination of military and economic

[9] Furthermore, it should be noted that the definition of power in such cases is problematic in itself, as some power structures, such as the state, can increase their power by being posed and analysed as a 'higher' category 'type', which can strengthen their negotiating position. This line of thought is important, but it is not an integral part of this paper, so I mention it only here, in a footnote.

resources, supplemented by ambition and soft power, broadly understood as the definition of power, then in the international system, meaning at the world level, there are two great powers: the United States and China. But if we look at the European region, which is of interest to Hungary, the situation is different. European lesser powers have little interest in the power struggles in South America or Oceania. If we narrow our theoretical framework from the world to the European region, the United States and China will be promoted to 'superpower' status. As a result, we can distinguish four great powers in the European region (Russia, France, Germany and the United Kingdom). Power status, on the other hand, is most often determined by the external image of the state's power, and states themselves, along their own interests, seek to manipulate this image of power to the best of their ability.

Let me take Russia and Germany as examples for a short paragraph! For Hungary, Russia is a regional great power. The Russian–Ukrainian war has weakened Russia's perceived power status, as its military has not been able to achieve the successes expected of it. How the consequences of the war will affect Russia's status as a power remains to be seen, and will depend largely on the outcome of the war. Although it can match the United States in global nuclear capability, it is qualitatively weaker than either the U.S. or China in economic terms. Germany is a regional economic great power, but at a global level it is nowhere near any of the hegemons.

In the theoretical framework, the United States and China are the two great powers with global reach and resources, able and willing to shape the international system. Their rivalry did not start in the early 2020s, and so in a slightly longer-term perspective, because of the historical past, we shall call the United States a hegemon. However, China is now on a par with the United States on almost all economic fronts, and in many cases has even overtaken it. But not yet in terms of the military (not to mention the soft power). It is based on this historic background that the United States is called the status quo hegemon and China the revisionist hegemon. On the one hand, the two hegemons will clash at the global level, but also, presumably, at the regional level, which is more important for Hungary, i.e. at the Central European level.

It is important to note that the international relations literature describes the situation from an Anglo-Saxon or specifically U.S. perspective. However, the United States is a great power with global ambitions, which has the capabilities to assume a hegemonic role. For example, when Harvard University professor Graham Allison writes about the China–U.S. great power rivalry, for him the system and the region are the same, since the 'power' of both states constitutes a global projection of power. Of course, Hungary, which does not have global ambitions, has to define a different power objective for itself.[10] The definition of this objective is not a matter for science, but it is worth bearing in mind when, starting from this theoretical framework, we come to the three dilemmas that determine Hungary's room for manoeuvre in the great power competition of our time.

THE FIRST DILEMMA: HUNGARY'S POWER IDENTITY

The first dilemma, the correct assessment essential for defining the Hungarian room for manoeuvre, is the definition of Hungary's power identity. Because power identity is the cornerstone of an effective and efficient foreign policy. For example, a great power should behave like a great power, because if it does not, it will be overpowered. In defining power identity, three aspects should be taken into account: first, the objective power status of the given state; second, its external identity (how it is viewed by other states); and third, its self-identity (how it views itself).

At the level of objective capacity and power status, two types of state power should be defined in terms of whether the given state has enough power to create the rules of the system. The one that is able to do so is called a great power, the one that is unable to do so is called a lesser power. If we start from this logic, in the international system Hungary cannot be defined as a great power, since our gross domestic product is about 50th[11]

[10] The issue is further complicated by the fact that in the non-strict social science and political science approach, analysts, experts and public writers often use these terms as well, but with different meanings.

[11] CIA 2021.

out of the nearly 200 states in the world, and although its military power is developing, it is far below that of the great powers.

On the question of its external identity, Hungary is seen as a small power by other states in the world. It is also worth noting that the exact definition of power status is always relative, in other words it depends on how many states make up the system concerned and how and into how many states all the available powers are distributed. At the global level today, there are serious differences between the top two powers (China and the United States) and the ten or fifteen or so middle powers that follow them (such as India, Russia, Germany, Japan), and everyone else, the small powers.

At the same time, Hungary's self-identity as a power, especially in the last ten years, clashes with the other two aspects of its power identity. It is noticeable that Hungary's foreign policy operates more along the logic of a weaker regional middle power, meaning that it refuses to 'fall in line', but sets its own independent, 'sovereign' power goals. The basis of this self-identification is the regional approach, where Hungary's power self-identity is positioned above the small power identity. In this approach, if Hungary's region of power is roughly Europe or the wider Central European region, then both its political ambition and its capacity to assert its interests, as well as its GDP and its military strength suggest a weaker middle power status or the possibility of achieving it.[12]

Whichever way we approach Hungary's power identity, Budapest, not being a great power, must be aware that it cannot make the rules of the system. If Washington and Beijing go down the path of decoupling and we drift towards a new Cold War, Hungary will not be able to prevent it. At the same time, it is important for Hungary to correctly define its power identity, as the external and self-identity images dictate different risk-taking logics. In a broader sense: in the logic of a small power, risk-reducing

[12] The concepts of middle power and small power also need clarification in the world of political science, especially with regard to middle powers and their varieties and changes. The definition of power identities is further complicated by the fact that, in addition to its capabilities, the aspirations and action potential of the state concerned must also be taken into account.

steps are the most rewarding, whereas in the case of a middle power identity (even if it is only regional or weaker), higher risk-taking tends to be the way forward.

THE SECOND DILEMMA: THE SECURITY DILEMMA WITHIN THE ALLIANCE

In addition to correctly defining its power identity, Hungary as a NATO member must, according to the realist approach, effectively resolve the security dilemma within the alliance. In this dilemma, two kinds of fears emerge in the allied small and middle powers, in times when great power rivalry intensifies. On the one hand, they are afraid of being abandoned by the great power (fear of abandonment), and on the other hand, they are afraid of being dragged by the great power into a war where they will be the victims (fear of entrapment). These are the foundations of the alliance security dilemma, the logic and drivers of which Hungary must correctly assess and build on to develop well-priced responses.[13]

The intention of the great powers is to create the impression in the allied small and middle powers that they must necessarily behave as the great power would like. But research proves that this is not the case – it is merely a political communication used by the great power to strengthen its own position.[14] While it is more important for the great power to preserve and maintain the relationship, the smaller allied power has some room for manoeuvre.[15] However, as soon as a great power decides that the sum of the actions of the small and middle power is too costly for it, it can break the relationship, either by leaving the small or middle power alone or by trapping it. These drastic steps should be avoided by the smaller power, so it is worth bearing this dilemma in mind when Hungary considers maximising its room for manoeuvre.

[13] Snyder 1984: 461–495.
[14] Snyder 2007.
[15] Simon 2019: 118–135.

The rules of the international system are not set by the small and middle powers, but by the great powers. And when the strongest great powers, the so-called hegemons, are present, the rules of the international system are made by them. And in our time, two hegemons are present, the United States and China, who seem to be on a collision course. Therefore, in resolving the alliance security dilemma, it is very important to decide what we predict as the outcome of the great power rivalry. So the primary question is whether the rivalry between the United States and China can escalate into a world war; because in such a case the great powers often sacrifice their small and middle power allies for their own survival. Of course, small and middle powers must avoid this.

The primary question, then, is what the future holds in terms of the U.S.–China great power rivalry and the system itself. Perhaps the most famous and widely read paper on the U.S.–China great power rivalry is by Harvard professor Graham Allison. The theoretical framework he calls the 'Thucydides trap' provides the first pillar for interpreting the rivalry. Allison is looking for the answer to whether two hegemons can avoid armed conflict. In his view, the conflict between the United States and China can be avoided, especially if the leaders of the two countries pay special attention to the peaceful settlement of this issue.[16] Some Chinese scholars have also concluded that the Thucydides trap can be avoided if the two great powers expand economic, political, security and cultural cooperation. Other researchers argue that conflict is almost inevitable, mainly because the sources and types of the conflict between the two great powers have increased dramatically.[17]

But there are interpretations that differ from this vision. Some scholars argue that states should not be ranked according to their objective power, but rather should be analysed on a relational basis.[18] This relational approach is seen as highly appropriate for small powers, although this type of approach is still less widespread. If we step outside the narrowest interpretation of realism, we can observe that some states do not look only at the resources

[16] Allison 2015.
[17] Deng 2001: 343–365.
[18] Long 2017: 144–160.

available, but also at the intentions of the other state. Here, the researchers say, military conflict between the United States and China is likely if the United States perceives China as a bad faith actor with which it cannot build a relationship of trust.[19]

But other prominent political analysts have argued that it is possible that China is making a peaceful rise. To achieve this, according to Barry Buzan and Michael Cox, all China needs to do is draw the right conclusions from the rise to power of the United States between 1865 and 1945.[20] Still others argue that even posing the question in this way is inappropriate, because it is not the rivalry between the two great powers that will force China and the United States into conflict, but the alliances between the two states in the region.[21] But even if war between the two hegemons can be avoided, it is not clear what kind of world is coming. Although economic war is the most anticipated vision, but in the past, economic wars were sooner or later followed by military ones. Another possibility is that technological-political competition will be replacing the traditional political-ideological rivalry.[22] According to a strategic study, China has no interest at all in suppressing the United States along traditional military lines. Instead of dominance, in line with China's long-term interests, longer-term cooperation is an equally conceivable vision.[23]

Overall, and in a broad historical perspective, we can distinguish sixteen periods of hegemonic rivalry over the past centuries.[24] Twelve of these ended in war, but in four cases war was avoided. The correct resolution of the Hungarian alliance security dilemma therefore depends largely on what we predict: whether there will be a war between the two great powers. And the most important thing is to decide whether our present and our future are different from the past.

19 Yoder 2019: 87–104.
20 Buzan–Cox 2013: 109–132.
21 Er 2016: 36–46.
22 Lippert–Perthes 2020.
23 Shifrinson 2020: 175–216.
24 Allison 2015.

THE THIRD DILEMMA: THE QUESTION OF THE UNIQUENESS OF OUR TIMES

The third important dilemma, then, is whether our present, that is, our age, is unique – in other words, whether it is different not only in quantity but also in quality from other periods in history. This question arises in the first place because we are experiencing a historically unique situation. The essence of this unique situation is that since 1945, there has been no direct great power war in our system, that is, on a world scale. There have been and still are small or so-called proxy wars, but no great power has been at war with another great power in the last three quarters of a century. Even in the Russian–Ukrainian war, we see a semi-proxy war rather than a direct one between great powers. The currently unpredictable outcome of the war and the conclusions that states will draw from it could have a major impact on this dilemma. Determining the cause of this situation is critical.

There are several possible explanations for the absence of a great power war. One explanation is that this period since 1945 is too short to draw any conclusions. If this is the case, there is no reason to talk about uniqueness, and hence this dilemma should be ignored. But, if this is indeed a unique historical situation, there may be several reasons, the correct recognition of which is of paramount importance in determining an effective response to the dilemma.

On the one hand, the proliferation of nuclear weapons may explain why there is no great power war. We can argue that war has become too expensive. If this is the case, then the rules of war have just changed and the response needs to be structured differently. Or it could be that globalisation processes have transformed societies to such an extent that we are talking about a qualitative change and it is not in anyone's interest to reverse it. Both claims are historically irrefutable because we have no counterexamples. But it is difficult to base a long-term foreign policy on these.

The absence of war may also have been caused by the fact that the current hegemon, the United States, often behaved differently than it does now. This has generally been confirmed by its multilateral diplomacy and its attempts to establish a liberal international world order – meaning that the United

States is not an interest-based great power, but a value-based one. Even if this explains the absence of great power wars, it is still worth examining the reasons for this. It should be noted that throughout history we have almost always observed multipolar or bipolar systems, never a period dominated by a single state that almost single-handedly dominated the whole system. But with the break-up of the Soviet Union, the U.S. found itself in this so-called unipolar situation. Unlike in historical examples, however, the hegemon in the system has invoked the value-based logic of the liberal world order over the last thirty years. However, this value-based great power behaviour could in fact conceal an interest-based approach, since the United States had no great power challenger.

Deciding this is of paramount importance in defining the Hungarian room for manoeuvre, as the autocracy of the liberal world order led by Washington seems to be challenged by the rise of China. In resolving this dilemma, the question to be decided is whether the kind of sphere of interest-based mentality last experienced during the Cold War can return. By spheres of interest, we mean a geographically delimited region where the strongest state can exercise power over other weaker states. It is a hierarchy-based micro system, where the state in power is strong enough, if its interests so require, to keep the other great powers out of the region and to keep the other states within its sphere of interest – i.e. the small and middle powers – dependent on it.

However, if we re-examine the events of the last thirty years through a realistic[25] lens, we can also find an alternative explanation for this period. Namely, that the United States has not left the spheres of interest behind, but has simply created a coherent, contiguous and almost boundless sphere of interest for itself. And here, the value-based approach was only an interest-based communication element.

In this dilemma, Hungary has to define its room for manoeuvre today without knowing for sure what the future holds, by only guessing from the

25 But in addition to the above, there is another possibility, namely that human nature itself has changed. This is an interesting philosophical possibility, but an analysis of this is beyond the scope of this paper.

signs. It would have to pursue a different strategy if it knew that the future would bring military war, or if it knew that the United States or China would win the great power rivalry, or even if it knew whether nuclear weapons or the spread of globalisation had made war obsolete. Since it does not know the answers, therefore, it faces a high uncertainty factor when determining its strategy. As a starting point, it is worth noting that Hungary's primary objective, like that of any state, is the same as it has always been and will be, namely to guarantee its own security.

MACRO-LEVEL RESPONSE STRATEGIES

A state needs to assert its interests effectively in the international system to guarantee its own security. And while international relations theory in the last century treated small and middle powers as marginal actors in terms of assertion of their interests in the international system, there are many modern studies that refute this. They describe, among other things, how the room for manoeuvre of small and middle powers have increased, especially since the end of the Cold War.[26] Small and middle powers may follow different strategies when faced with a rising China and renewed great power competition in this new international context. Whatever strategy they choose, for them in particular, there can be a lot of derivative returns if they separate their actions from the explanation or political narrative of their actions.

At the systemic level, there are three distinct response strategies that a state in such a situation can choose from. Of these, international relations theory usually cites balancing behaviour as the main motivating factor when describing the alliance or positioning strategies of individual states.[27] What this means in practice is that when one state gains too much power in the system, the other states, fearing for their own security, will join forces and counterbalance it. The second commonly observed behaviour

[26] Willis 2021: 19–32.

[27] Walt 1987.

is 'bandwagoning'. Here, the less powerful states respond to the rise of an increasingly powerful state or emerging hegemon with a reaction other than balancing. They do not counterbalance, but join the rising state. They may do so to preserve their own security or for profit,[28] trusting that they will be remunerated by the rising great power. A third option is the 'hedging' strategy. Here, a state tries to enter into hedging transactions that limit its potential losses.[29]

From these response strategies, the great powers can basically choose independently on the basis of their own capabilities. However, for small and middle powers, where there is no independent guarantee of security, different rules apply. For small and middle powers that are already part of an alliance system, alliance influence should also be taken into account when developing a response strategy.

When defining the room for manoeuvre of small and middle powers, it is important to bear in mind that in the past, the great powers have always looked after their own interests and often just took advantage of small and middle powers. And since it is not the small and middle powers that make the rules of the system, but the great powers, the small and middle powers must pay special attention not only to their actions but also to the appearance of their actions.[30] With a well-chosen communication strategy, the same action can be communicated differently to the two hegemons, which can increase the room for manoeuvre of a small or middle power.

THEORETICAL SUMMARY, PRACTICAL CONCLUSION

We argue that the correct interpretation of the three theoretical dilemmas presented in this chapter will determine the extent and scope of Hungary's room for manoeuvre. However, these theoretical issues, namely Hungary's identity as a small or middle power, the management of the double

[28] Schweller 1994: 72–107.
[29] Cheng-Chwee 2008: 159–185.
[30] Rafique 2021: 16–33.

fears caused by the alliance security dilemma and the perception of our era as unique, do not result in a clear practical proposal. Translating theory into practice is not a straightforward process, which is why some other aspects are worth mentioning.

The first thing to remember is that the definition of power is constantly changing, and science is always one step behind politics. This puts theory at a 'competitive disadvantage' compared to practice, although the two intersect at some point.[31] Furthermore, it is also a costly procedure to leave a system of alliance. Small and middle powers do not break their alliance ties easily, and the great power rivalry process alone so far has not provided sufficient justification for this. Finally, in considering the specificities of the Central European region, it is worth pointing out that research shows that lesser power states "have been able to influence the policies of the great powers during periods when they temporarily lost power in the region".[32]

Thus, when the systemic position of a great power leading an alliance system appears to be undermined, the room for manoeuvre of the small and middle powers in the alliance system is increased: but only moderately. And only with caution should this room for manoeuvre be increased, because the great power uses a different logic than the small and middle power, and this increases the risk of error.

In order to reduce this risk of error, when increasing Hungary's room for manoeuvre, we propose to separate the management of resources from the management of influence,[33] and the actions from the communication of actions. In these times of systemic uncertainty, it is important for Hungary to increase its room for manoeuvre, but only as long as this does not cause too much damage within its own alliance system. There is no point in overstretching, because all the small and middle powers in history have come out badly from such actions.

31 This issue deserves a separate study.

32 Borhi 2014: 61–73.

33 Nasra 2011: 164–180.

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